Traditional Institutions, Social Capital, and Multi-Institutional Partnerships for Agricultural Development: Implications for a new Extension Paradigm

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Abstract

Traditional institutions - such as indigenous cooperation groups, peace pact systems, household systems, elders and political leadership, are important forms of social organization in many parts of the developing world. After many decades of neglect and near disdain, development agencies worldwide have now come to acknowledge how critically important it is to incorporate traditional or local level institutions serving the poor as partners in the development process. Hence, discussion about the future direction of extension worldwide has centered on different models of public-private-local institution partnerships. While supporting the overall objectives of multi-institutional partnership, this paper analyzes the opportunities and challenges inherent in developing public sector-local level institution partnerships for agricultural extension in less developed countries. It contends that factors such as structural and institutional defects in public sector extension in many less developed countries, a lack of commitment to the pluralism and low institutional capacity, constitute major constraints to the development of true partnership with traditional institutions. The paper recommends reforms such as the decentralization of public sector extension, professional development of extension personnel, and the organization of rural communities into empowerment nodes, as means to enhance capacity for multi-institutional partnership for extension.
Introduction

Traditional institutions, social capital, and multi-institutional partnerships have become the dominant concepts of international development lexicon, over the last decade. After decades of neglect and near disdain for local level institutions and the social capital they embody, development agencies worldwide, including most public sector extension systems, now realize that partnership with local level or traditional institutions is crucial to the achievement of the goal of sustainable development. Hence most discussions concerning the future direction of public sector extension, inevitably include different models of multi-institutional partnership, involving different mixes of public-private sector, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and to a lesser extent, local farmer groups.

Swanson and Samy (2000), for instance, presented a model for delivering extension service in less developed countries based on the concept of division of labor or responsibilities among public, private and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Berlin and Andreata (2001) also presented two case studies from Australia in which farmers, as the result of group extension programs, implicitly and explicitly are held to have responsibility for transferring group experiences to farmer network outside the immediate group. The Overseas Development Institute (2002), using the Multi-Agency Partnership (MAP) model presented numerous case studies in West Africa using the partnership approach to implement agricultural development projects in rural communities. Schorosch & Seck, (1998) described a Madagascar project that involved institutional and structural modifications of the T & V extension model to encompass a multi-agency approach involving local farmer groups, municipal government, NGOs and private operators. It is noteworthy to point out that of all the partnership models, the public-private format predominates, while partnerships with local level farmer institutions or organizations are the least common (Rivera & Zijp, 2000).

It should have been so obvious that local people and their institutions, being well ingrained in the unique social, cultural and agro-ecological realities of their local communities, should be major partners in their development. Hence, it incredible that it has taken the development community this long to come to this realization. However, as commendable as the current emphasis on partnership is, unless lessons learned from past failed development models are brought to bear on its implementation, the partnership approach is likely to suffer similar fate. Experience from infrastructure development, the Training & Visit (T &V), and Farming Systems Research/Extension provide valuable lessons relevant to the current debate about institutional partnership for development. One of these lessons includes the fact that factors such as “opportunistic labeling” or the “bandwagon effect”, lack of a strong theoretical grounding, the distortion effect of the unique macro-economic and political environments of each country, can drastically alter a project’s outcome.

Opportunistic labeling, or the bandwagon effect, refers to the practice among many development practitioners to merely make cosmetic changes to existing projects and then label them as being in compliance with the dominant development model. For instance, on-farm demonstration projects suddenly became on-farm adaptive research in the 1980s, without implementing the structural and institutional modifications necessary to comply with the true participatory, bottom-up spirit inherent in Farming Systems Research/Extension. In the 1980s billions of dollars, most of it in the form of World bank loans, was invested in the implementation of the T & V extension model in many less developed countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America. As commendable as T & V’s goal of expanding extension’s reach
was, it failed to achieve to its potential due to a failure to pay enough attention to the macro-economic realities of many less developed countries, where poor human, physical and research infrastructure made the implementation of T & V extension, a logistic nightmare. Hence, as national extension systems embark on the brave new world of institutional partnership for the delivery of extension services, it is important that issues of theoretical, institutional, macro-economic and political dimension be clarified and elaborated to avoid the mistakes of many past failed agricultural development models. First and foremost, the two major prerequisites for implementing true partnership, a political commitment to pluralism, and the establishment of trust between potential partners, are two ingredients that are most lacking in many less developed countries. Until recently, many countries in Africa, Latin America and South Asia, where the bulk of the world’s poor live, were ruled by authoritarian regimes. Hence, many lack the tradition of democratic pluralism, which is crucial to implementing partnerships with traditional institutions. Similarly, years of broken promises, the implementation of policy of resource extraction from the poor, and inefficient and unresponsive public institutions, have all but destroyed the basic foundation for the development of a trusting relationship between government and local level institutions. This is perhaps the greatest obstacle to multi-institutional partnerships in many less developed countries.

Secondly, mere rhetoric about partnership, without a major restructuring of the anti-partnership top-down structures and cultures of many development institutions, is not likely to bring about the desired outcome of sustainable development. National extension systems in many of the less developed countries, are housed in the highly bureaucratic, inefficient and paternalistic Ministry of Agriculture. This is clearly not a recipe for developing institutional partnership with local level institutions. Finally, the general assumption in the development community that local level institutions and the social capital they embody, only have positive impact, is over-simplistic. Portes (1995), and Brown (1998), have all noted the inherent costs of maintaining social ties, observing that membership in a tightly knit network can subject one to restrictive regulations and sanctions that limit individual entrepreneurship or innovation. It is a widely recognized fact that cultural norms in many rural communities in the less developed countries, often subjugate women, minority ethnic groups, and the weak. In many less developed countries, access to even the most basic of government services is at a premium, and is often at the root of corruption and many violent inter-ethnic conflicts. Hence, one group’s claim of social capital as the reason for gaining access is another group’s claim of nepotism, thus complicating current discussion about the link between social capital and development.

Hence, as positive as the current emphasis by many agricultural extension systems, on multi-institutional partnership and social capital is, the issues raised above constitute potential pitfalls that demand in-depth analysis and elaboration if institutional partnership is to succeed. This presentation is, therefore, an attempt to analyze the opportunities and challenges to developing partnership between public sector extension and local level farmers’ institutions in less developed countries.

**Purpose and Objectives**

Public sector extension worldwide is in the process of undergoing, probably, its most revolutionary institutional change as multi-institutional partnership becomes the preferred approach for the delivery of extension services. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to
analyze the opportunities and challenges involved in developing partnerships with local level institutions in the delivery of extension services. Using a thematic approach, the specific objectives of the paper include:

1. To analyze the structures and functions of traditional institutions, and social capitals among rural households in less developed countries.
2. To analyze structural, methodological and macro-economic policy constraints to the development and implementation of a multi-institutional partnership approach to extension services in less developed countries.
3. To develop a model for fostering institutional partnership for extension services.

Methods and Data Sources

The presentation relies very heavily on extensive literature review, and on data collected from a major agricultural development project in Central Nigeria. The project in question involved a multi-institutional approach, including local, state, national and international agricultural development agencies in the implementation of an agricultural development project in Niger State, located in the Central region of Nigeria. The data presented in this paper were collected using qualitative methodologies such as non-participant observation, and extensive focus group interviews.

The Project

The Niger State Agricultural Development Project (NSADP) is the offshoot of the Bida ADP, which was established in 1980. The project involved a combination of rural infrastructure development, the implementation of the Training & Visit (T &V) extension model, and micro-irrigation development for lowland rice. It also included a Farming Systems Research/Extension project that was implemented by the IITA in the mid-1980s and 1990s. Hence, the NSADP represents a unique case study for analyzing the opportunities and challenges involved in implementing a multi-institutional approach to agricultural development. Hence, data from the project are used to illuminate the paper’s themes of social capital and multi-institutional partnership for extension.

Traditional Institutions, Social Capital, and Development

Many rural agricultural communities in the less developed countries (LDCs) are isolated, and enjoy little if any access to formal government institutions and social amenities. Hence, traditional institutions, including indigenous cooperation groups, peace pact systems, household systems, elders and political leadership, constitute important forms of social, economic, cultural and political organizations that knit members together into units for mutually beneficial collective action. Traditional institutions often set up a reward-sanction mechanism that assists people to act in cooperation with one another, and therefore embody important forms of social capital that is so critical for survival.

Social capital has become one of the most written-about concepts in discussion about international development in the last decade. Unlike its conventional conceptualization with micro-level of individuals and household networks, social capital is now conceived to include meso- and macro-levels of analysis (Brown, 1998, Bingen, 2000). In addition to the conventional development capitals, such as financial, human, and physical capitals, social capital is now regarded as a key element in analyzing the development potentials of individuals, organizations, communities, and even nation states (Brown, 1998). Simply put,
social capital refers to an individual, an organization, or a community’s ability to mobilize resources through the social network in which they are embedded (Brown, 1998). This paper adopts this tripartite, (micro, meso, and macro-level) configuration of social capital in its discussion about institutional partnerships, social capital and sustainable development.

Central to the social and economic survival of rural people in most less developed countries is the family and kinship network. Using a micro-level conceptualization, Rose (1997) defines social capital as consisting of informal social networks and formal organizations used by individuals and households to produce goods and services for their own consumption, exchange or sale. In the NSADP project the “Efako” household system encompassing a male household head, his wife or wives, his married sons and their families, and his unmarried children, constitutes the most important network regulating agricultural and other economic activities. In addition to regulating members’ access to labor, land, and subsistence resources, it incorporates a reward versus sanction system to ensure members’ compliance. For instance, the practice of intra-household marketing of farm produce rewards women for their loyalty to the unit. Under this system, women buy farm produce from the household at below market rates, and then sell for a profit in the open market. Similarly, the “Efako” unit pays for the wedding obligations of single male members, while non-participants do not enjoy this benefit, thus implementing a reward-sanction mechanism to ensure participation by members of household.

At the meso-level, community-wide institutions facilitate transactions among nonkin by regulating the conduct of the social, cultural, religious and economic life of rural households. Among the Nupe the hierarchical traditional political structure starting from ward heads, to village heads, to district heads, and ending at the top with the paramount ruler the “Etsu Nupe” as the ultimate symbol of ethnic power, social cohesion and order. Group saving/credit, labor, and group farming networks to which 65.4%, 81.4% and 88.9% of household heads respectively, claim membership represent important community institutions that contribute to economic and agricultural activities within the project.

While rural communities and their local institutions, may be isolated from government institutions and services, they are however, not immune from the impact of government’s macro-economic policies and institutions. In the NSADP project, government’s policy goal in the 1980s, of increasing the output of rice, largely to meet the demands of the politically more influential urban-dwellers led to increased government’s investment in promoting rice technology. This in turn led to the mobilization of local resources by farmers towards rice production. Similarly, the dominant political philosophy of government vis-à-vis pluralism versus authoritarianism has a great effect on the nature of interaction between local community networks and government agencies and institutions. It also indirectly influences the nature of institutions pluralistic versus top-down that develop and thrive at the local level.

Traditional institutions and the social capital they embody represent great opportunity for the development of multi-institutional partnerships for sustainable development. By promoting the sense of ownership at the local level, and by bringing to bear the unique insights of local people in the conceptualization, implementation and evaluation of development projects and programs, a successful outcome is likely to be achieved. It is however, pertinent to take heed to the warning of Berry (1993), who cautioned against getting caught up in the romantic portrayal of indigenous institutions in development literature, as models of altruistic behavior. In her view, rural economies and local level
institutions are more akin to “shifting kaleidoscope of conflicts, alliance and maneuvers, hence, the appearance of collective identity does not necessarily guarantee collective action”. For instance, an analysis of the cultural norms and institutions within the NSADP shows clear evidence of discrimination against women in the terms of access to land, labor, and human capital resources. Therefore, it is important that extension and other development agencies target social networks serving women, minority groups, and the poorest of the poor.

Multi-Institutional Partnerships for Extension Services

Increasing evidence shows that social cohesion is critical for societies to prosper economically and for development to be sustainable. It is now widely recognized that multi-institutional partnership and social capital are crucial to the attainment of the goal of sustainable development (Putnam, 1993; Onibon, Dabire & Ferroukhi (No date), and Schorosch & Seck, 1998). However, there is danger inherent in perceiving multi-institutional partnership as the magic bullet for resolving all that is wrong with public sector extension in the less developed countries. Swanson and Samy (2000), for instance, in their public-private partnership model of extension, contended that “the private sector firms have access to research and development in other countries; therefore they can provide farmers with superior technologies.” There are many problems with this assumption. First, there is the problem of technological compatibility. The failure of green revolution in many Sub-Sahara African countries has demonstrated that foreign-sourced technologies, in many instances, are not compatible with the unique agro-ecological and consumption patterns of the receiving nations. Secondly, the private sectors in many less developed countries, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, are still at their infancy, and hence are not in a position to take on the difficult task of serving the technology needs of millions of resource-poor farm households who dominate the agricultural industry. While multinational corporations from the West are already making some in-road into the less developed countries, reliance on foreign firms for agricultural technologies is likely to raise serious national food security concern in many less developed countries.

However, more important than the problems associated with the private sector taking over the technology-transfer responsibilities of public sector extension, are issues such as excessive centralization of powers, and a lack of commitment to pluralism, in many less developed countries. Until recently, many African countries were ruled by authoritarian military regimes, in which the most rudimentary act of democratic public participation, the casting of electoral votes, was not allowed. Even in many supposedly democratic federal republics, such as Nigeria, power is so concentrated at the center so much so that the state governments and local communities do not have the power to establish their own local police forces! The same level of centralization permeates most governmental institutions, including the highly bureaucratized public extension service housed in the ministry of agriculture. Hence, despite the rhetoric about multi-institutional partnership for extension services, the fundamental infrastructure necessary for partnership, a commitment to pluralism and institutional decentralization, are lacking in many less developed countries. Given the power conferred on bureaucrats by the centralization of the control of resource and government patronage, there is little incentive for an internal-driven institutional transformation to a more decentralized structure.

Robinson (2001), captured the essence of the challenges inherent in the on-going effort to develop and maintain a public-private-local institutional partnership for extension
services in the less developed countries when he observed that:
“The warm reassuring rhetoric of partnership conceals, however, the considerable difficulties involved in making it work. Partnership is not easy to establish and nurture. While, it is quite easy to put together organizational arrangements that look and sound like partnerships, it is however, far more difficult to develop organizational forms and processes, which are really imbued with that almost intangible spirit of partnership. Moreover, partnerships - especially 'real' partnerships - are full of dilemmas and difficulties. There are, for example, different perspectives, conflicts, personality clashes, inequalities of power and knowledge, and problems of representation and legitimacy.”

**Implications & Recommendations**

Given past records, rigid institutional structures, limited human, physical and financial capital base; public sector extension in most less developed countries, by themselves, lack the capacity to meet the agricultural development challenges of the new millennium. In addition to the perennial problem of poverty, and environmental degradation, agricultural development worldwide now has to contend with issues such as global trade regime, global competition, and the impact of biotechnology, to name but a few. Hence, multi-institutional partnership with the opportunity to harness resources from different sources, is the most viable approach to the delivery of extension services in the less developed countries. It is, however important to note that multi-institutional partnership is neither a quick fix nor the magic bullet for resolving the myriad of problems facing public sector extension in the less developed countries. Secondly, partnership between two or more inefficient institutions is worse than one inefficient institution going it alone. Hence, making public sector extension efficient is critical to the success of any partnership approach. Additionally, with the high degree of centralization in many of the less developed countries, it is also impossible to develop true partnerships. Given the entrenched power in the Ministries of Agriculture, where many less developed countries house and manage their extension services, there is serious doubt that the twin goal of improved efficiency and decentralization can be achieved under the current configuration. It is, therefore, recommended that public sector extension be detached from government bureaucracy, and placed under a quasi-independent management structure involving a mix of university, public, private and community level personnel. While this recommendation may sound radical, many less developed countries have implemented similar reforms for agricultural research, while still maintaining government oversight.

Although the term capacity-building has almost become a cliché in international development lexicon, however, in order for local level institutions and the private sector in most less developed countries, to provide any sustainable platform for partnership, capacity building activities have to be implemented. In order to overcome the logistics of partnering with a multitude of isolated and weak local level institutions that dot the agricultural landscape of many less developed countries, communities should be organized into larger empowerment nodes, using criteria such as cultural, agro-ecological and economic similarities. Using the framework of empowerment nodes, confidence-building activities such as adult education programs, organizational management training, and locally sustainable micro-enterprise projects could then be implemented.
Finally, in order to replace the existing top-down institutional culture that permeates many extension institutions in the developing world, with one that is conducive to multi-institutional partnership, massive investment in pre- and post-professional education for extension personnel will be needed.

In summary, this paper, while supporting the idea of a multi-institutional partnership approach for extension, has pointed out some of the challenges and opportunities inherent in such an approach. It concludes by observing that multi-institutional partnership is neither a quick fix nor a magic bullet for resolving the myriad of institutional, macroeconomic and structural problems that confront public sector extension. Unless a holistic approach is adopted to resolve these problems, the promise of multi-institutional partnership for extension, like those of other models before it, will remain just that, a promise, without a chance of realization.

References