Public Sector Agricultural Extension System in the Northern Province of South Africa: A System Undergoing Transformation

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Abstract
The dawn of the new democracy in South Africa brought in its wake the discourse of rapid change and systems transformation unfamiliar to many of her citizens. This paper examines the public sector agricultural extension system and the challenges it faces in the young democracy. Challenges facing public sector agricultural extension in the Northern Province of South Africa are rooted in the history of African smallholder farming, institutional arrangements, structural adjustment programs, the policy framework, new clients, and the reorientation of the agricultural extension system. Statutorily mandated to serve the poor subsistence farmers, the public sector extension system has to be transformed to meet not only the current policy framework, but to adequately serve the “emerging/commercial” farmers. Structural adjustment programs and their implementation continuously determine the delivery capacity of the system. Meanwhile, the morale of stakeholders is declining in this era of transformation.

Drawing from a review of literature and personal experiences, we suggest that the public sector extension service is overwhelmed with the new changes. However, there are educational lessons embedded in the province’s “farmer first” principle, implemented through decentralization of management authority, application of participatory extension approaches, and strengthening institutional capacity of African smallholder farmer organizations. The implications of the adjustments programs are discussed.

Introduction
The Ministry for Land Affairs asserted in 1997 that the agricultural sector in South Africa is highly dualistic by design because for almost a century, “South Africa supported the development of large commercial farms, thereby displacing people to marginal areas and increasing rural poverty” (p.29). On the one hand is the white commercial farmer, a generator of wealth and major contributor to the country’s economy. On the other, is the predominantly African smallholder farmer, a paragon for basic survival and poverty alleviation through subsistence production (Ministry for Agriculture and Land Affairs, 1995 & 1998). Nowhere in the country can one observe this dichotomous scenario succinctly play itself out more than in the Northern Province. In this Province, only 10,000 white commercial farmers contribute toward the provincial economy and job creation, while more than 500,000 African smallholder farmers engage in some agricultural activity for basic survival purposes (Ministry for Agriculture, Land and Environment, 1995; Ngomane, 2000). We focus in this paper on the latter category of farmers, for they are, by convention and necessity, the primary recipients of public sector extension services. Smallholder farmers cannot afford private extension services, and therefore, rely on public extension support services. But, Ngomane (2000) found that the public sector agricultural extension system in its current status is not geared to satisfy the needs of the resource-poor smallholder farmers, and that the system has to be transformed to help smallholder farmers to break away from the bondage of dependency and poverty. There are some initiatives in this regard aimed at strengthening institutional capacity of farmer organizations and related structures. The Northern Province, in its diversity, dualism and extensive poverty (Stats S.A., 1998) provides an excellent example of the public sector agricultural extension system undergoing transformation that we share in this paper.

Methods and Data Sources
A review of literature and personal experiences of the principal author were the data sources for the study. A number of books, journal articles, conference proceedings and government documents were reviewed to identify challenges facing public sector extension services in a system undergoing transformation. Information from informal
discussions with field extension agents, smallholder farmers and formal meetings with senior officials in the Ministry of Agriculture were also used as sources of data.

**Historical and Socio-economic Context**

Commonly known as the Great North and the Gateway to Africa, the Northern Province is one of nine provinces in South Africa. The province is home to a complex cultural and ethnic matrix of VaTsonga, VhaVenda, BaSotho, Afrikaners, English, and Indians totaling 4.93 million people, of which 96.7% are Africans (Stats S.A., 1998). The same source also states that the total population in the country stood at 44 million in 1998. The Great North covers about 10% of the 122.3 million hectares of South African land (Stats S.A., 1998; Ministry for Agriculture and Land Affairs, 1998).

The majority of people in the province live in scattered villages with an average population of 4,000 per village (Ministry for Agriculture, Land and Environment, 1995). Women constitute 54.3% of the rural population, the highest in the country, of which 72% are involved in subsistence agriculture (Stats S.A., 1998; Ngomane, 2000). For this reason, its leaders commonly refer to the province as a female province (Northern Province Office of the Premier, 1999). As the second poorest province in the country, next to the Eastern Cape (Stats S.A., 1998), the Northern Province is heavily reliant on the agricultural sector to alleviate poverty. Resource-poor smallholder farmers constitute the primary clientele for public sector agricultural extension in the Northern Province. Characterized by a history of dependency (Shah; van Koppen; Merry; de Lange & Samad, 2000), diversified farming, and limited access to production resources such as land, credit, and support services, the majority of the smallholder farmers are not entrepreneurs in agriculture (Bembridge, 1999). Similar characteristics exist for smallholder farmers in other rural provinces. In each province, the government is focusing on strategies to promote better livelihoods for smallholder farm families. Of course, these strategies are dependent on institutional arrangements within each province.

**Present Institutional Arrangements**

In the Northern Province, public sector agricultural extension strategies are developed and implemented under the leadership of the political head—a political appointee not necessarily trained in agriculture, and the administrative head—a career civil servant trained in agriculture. These leaders are housed within the provincial Ministry for Agriculture and Land Affairs. The way in which this leadership is coordinated impacts in several ways the normal operations of the Ministry and the socio-economic situation in the province. We discuss two main areas, namely, political and administrative support:

a) **Political support.** The provincial Ministry for Agriculture is a second-level statutory body, next to the National Ministry for Agriculture, whose structure and functions have been finalized in section 126 of the Constitution. Headed by a Member of the Executive Council (MEC), a political appointee, the provincial Ministry is mandated to, among other things, provide support to farmers and agricultural communities with regard to extension services, training, financing, household food security, disaster management, agricultural economics, agricultural engineering technology, marketing information and infrastructure, irrigation, and stock watering systems (Ministry for Agriculture and Land Affairs, 1995). These are priority programs aimed at advancing political government goals. Delivery on the mandate is interrupted on a regular basis by such things as cabinet reshuffles. The government rotates MECs in various ministries based on their ability to enhance service delivery. From 1995 to the present, three MECs served the Ministry for Agriculture. The Extension Service suffers the most whenever such cabinet reshuffles occur, for the structure has to be reviewed, priority areas redefined, and personnel reallocated. These changes often create delays and instability in public sector extension service delivery. Critical to extension services in many ways is the fact that the political office maintains an open door policy and remains superior to the administrative head. Meaning, everyone, especially farmers, have open access, through whatever means, to the office of the MEC to raise concerns and problems. Most often, the MEC would with good intentions make a commitment on behalf of the Ministry to address the issues raised without prior consideration of possible administrative constraints. Thereafter, the honor lies on the administrative leadership to make good on such
promises. It’s a delicate power relation situation, which depending on the context could accelerate or hamper service delivery.

b) Administrative support. At the level of Deputy Director General, the career civil servant and administrative head of the provincial Ministry for Agriculture and Land Affairs supervises all activities through a hierarchy of top, middle, and field level professionals and wage employees. The administrative head has to abide by public service regulations as they execute their work and remain accountable to the MEC. Conflicts of interest often arise because the MEC has to satisfy the needs of political constituencies irrespective of administrative procedures, while the administrative head has to follow regulations to the letter so as to keep their position. Other challenges facing the Deputy Director General relate to staff shortages. Among an estimated total staff of 11,000 in the Ministry of Agriculture and Land Affairs, only 1,200 (9.2%) render professional and technical services. Of the 1,200 only 46 are subject matter specialists, while 163 serve as community agricultural development technicians, 721 agricultural extension technicians, and 370 agricultural and rural infrastructure development technicians. The rest are office support staff and laborers working at project level but not directly involved with extension programs. Those directly involved with the management, extension programming and field level service delivery has to work long hours to make up for the staff shortages. Again, despite the high level of commitment from the leadership, professional and technical staffs, support services to clients remain inadequate, for 92% of the budget allocation goes directly towards the 11,000 personnel expenditure (Ngomane, 2000). As a result, government called for radical structural adjustment programs beneficial to the farmers and the service providers.

Structural Adjustment Programs

Nationally, several structural adjustment programs were initiated since 1995 to minimize the dualism prevalent in the agricultural sector. The Broadening Access to Agriculture Thrust (BATAT) was one such strategy developed to guide budgeting for the new agricultural policy framework. In addition, BATAT facilitates the establishment of programs and projects for the historically disadvantaged smallholder farmers thereby expanding their access to commercial agriculture. Focusing on five areas, financial services, human resources and development, delivery systems, technology development, and marketing, the program empowered many farmers (Ministry for Agriculture and Land Affairs, 1998). For instance, smallholder farmers in Mpumalanga purchased farms in groups whilst some organized themselves into commodity groups.

However, in the Northern Province diversity issues took precedence over farmer-centered programs such as BATAT because of the amalgamation of the four homelands of Lebowa, Venda, Gazankulu, and the Central governments. This is consistent with others findings that ethnic, racial and sectoral tensions in fledgling democracies does affect change processes (Macek; Flanagan; Gallay; Kostron; Botcheva & Csapo, 1989). For the Northern Province dealing with these diversity challenges was a setback to the restructuring process of the extension service delivery system. For instance, an effort to foster integration through staff relocations across regional boundaries created complications of language—in the province are 5 of the 11 official languages in South Africa. Again, staff relocations increased transfer costs, and disrupted functional programs and projects.

Furthermore, Ngomane (2000) found that fiscal constraints made it almost impossible for the Ministry to provide support services to extension personnel, especially housing, transportation, and either formal or non-formal in-service training. A moratorium on purchase of subsidized vehicles put in place from 1996 to 2000, denied officers access to transportation (Ngomane, 2000). With an average extension agent-farmer ratio of 1:500, the chances of extension personnel reaching all clients at their own cost, and within the parameters of the traditional extension system, was highly limited. Promotions and merit awards were not made for the same reasons (Ngomane, 2000). As Chambers, cited in Shah, et al. (2000), observed extension personnel were demoralized. In several consultation processes involving government and the clients, smallholder farmers questioned the role of public extension service in the rural provinces (Ministry for Agriculture, Land and Environment, 1995; Ministry for Agriculture and Land Affairs, 1998). The policy framework outlined in the Draft White Paper for the Ministry for Agriculture, Land and Environment (1995) justified the criticism of public sector agricultural extension service. This framework outlined mandatory policy principles and actions by the
Ministry for the clients without necessarily providing resources to enable the system to realistically transform policy into action. Selected aspects of the policy framework are discussed next.

The Policy Framework for a Public Sector Agricultural Extension System

The Ministry for Agriculture, Land, and Environment (1995) developed the following policy framework.

1) Agricultural extension will provide appropriate information to help farmers make their own production and marketing decisions. An agricultural support service should start from the premise that all farmers are capable decision-makers, who need relevant information and support services for their decision-making processes. Therefore, providing information on a wide range of production alternatives, rather than a pre-designed package, will be the most effective process.

2) The local knowledge of farmers will be recognized, validated, and complemented by applied research and technology development programs.

3) Extension and research staff will be accountable to clients through the participation of farmer organizations and emerging agricultural structures in decision-making processes.

4) The funding of need-driven research, extension, and training will be the primary responsibility of government with the highest priority given to smallholder farmers.

5) Institutional capacity building of farmers at local, regional, and provincial levels will be recognized, facilitated, and supported to ensure that they have a say in formulating policies that affect them (p. 7).

These are sound policies designed by top-managers with the interest of the farmers in mind. However, the reality of the system proved different, for the following reasons:

1) Most agricultural extension staffs do not have the requisite training to be responsive to farmers’ needs. The curricula in agricultural colleges and universities does not encourage innovative, critical thinking, and skill development in problem-solving that would help extension personnel deal with the multifaceted problems they encounter in their work with farmers and communities (CTA Spore No. 72, 1997). As a result, a disparity exists between government policy and actual field-based extension activities. Advice to the farmers is often not based on the farmers’ needs, but rather on the extension agents’ area of interest, knowledge base, or both (Ngomane, 2000).

2) Extension agents are paid by the government, and therefore, remain accountable to the government as the employer, not to the smallholder farmers (Bembridge, 1999; Northern Province Office of the Premier, 1999). The National Ministry for Agriculture (1998) noted that without transformation of the system, smallholder farmers could only voice their dissatisfaction with the extension service, which they do through various farmer organizations and community forums; however, these farmers might not take any corrective action.

3) In the area of research, funding is a problem in the province due to fiscal constraints (Ngomane, 2000). The capacity to respond to and conduct appropriate research for smallholder farmers is lacking. First, the Agricultural Research Council (ARC), a statutory body formed under the Agricultural Research Act of 1990, has as its implicit mandate, the promotion of agriculture and agricultural-related industries. Beneficiaries of ARC are mostly the white commercial farmers who have access to the research stations and have the means to pay for their research needs. At the provincial level, the linkage between the ARC, the departmental research units, and extension is weak. Whereas extension staff within the Ministry is actually stationed in villages to work directly with the smallholder farmers, most research staff from the ARC would not easily venture into village settings to interact with local extension and smallholder farmers. Instead, following the traditional technology transfer system (Chambers, Pacey & Trupp, 1989), extension and subject-matter specialists simply recommend prepackaged technologies to the farmers without an active, collaborative learning process (CTA Spore No. 72, 1997).
The gravity of these constraints is underscored by the creative initiatives government is taking to combat them. Since 1997 institutional capacity building is diligently pursued at the provincial, regional, and local levels to increase the production and income generating activities of smallholder farmers, especially rural women in agriculture. A legal entity known as the Forum Uniting Women in Agriculture (FUWA) was established in 1998 to empower and give women a collective voice as they interact with government, financing institutions, the private sector, donor agencies, and non-government organizations (Ministry for Agriculture and Land Affairs, 1998). With political support and continuous training, FUWA stands a better chance of serving as a vehicle to transform and strengthen smallholder farming in the Northern Province.

The Ministry for Agriculture is further committed to strengthening the institutional capacity of African smallholder farmer organizations such as the Northern Province Farmers’ Union (NOPAFU), the Great North Farmers’ Union, and other commodity-based farmers’ associations. The significance of empowering farmer organizations to drive their own agricultural agenda cannot be over-emphasized. Structural adjustment programs call for decentralization and restructuring of services to the end-users, and as Frederickson and Vissia (1998) noted, farmers as stakeholders must be involved through public debates to secure their full views in the process of empowerment. In this context, empowerment is the status, which enables individuals or groups to make decisions and impact life economically at family and community levels.

The New Clients and Reorientation of Extension Services

In recognition of the challenges facing public sector extension services as described above, the provincial Ministry of Agriculture, Land Affairs redefined the public sector clientele in 1998 and embarked upon a reorientation program involving managers, subject matter specialists, researchers, extension agents, and farmers. The three client categories identified are as follows:

i) Resource-poor smallholder farmers - producing and/or processing only for subsistence.

ii) Emerging smallholder farmers - producing for both subsistence and commercial purposes.

iii) Commercial farmers - producing for internal and external markets.

Overlaps from one category to the other would be recognized as clients gradually move across categories. Increase in farming knowledge, productivity, and generated income would be the determining factors for the move across the three categories. The first category was prioritized as the most needy group for public extension services. Category two was defined as in need of specialized extension services to be jointly provided by the Ministry of Agriculture and Land Affairs personnel and the Agriculture and Rural Development Cooperation (ARDC). The ARDC is the development arm for the Ministry, established to support emerging-commercial farmers. New entrants into commercial farming, such as the beneficiaries of land reform, would fall under this category. The third category already utilizes private sector extension services. The overall intention was to help develop the masses of resource-poor farmers over a set period to the emerging and commercial farmer categories. A natural progression from emerging and commercial to fully-fledged commercial was envisaged in the long-term for the economic growth of the province. Public extension service staff had to be retrained to support the first two client categories.

The main aim of the reorientation program was to encourage collaboration and integration by extension, research, tertiary institutions, and the clients at project inception, planning, and implementation levels. A donor funded program called Broadening Agricultural Service and Extension Delivery (BASED) became the lead pilot program as an alternative methodology to the traditional personal contact approach. Implemented in two regions of the province—Capricon and Vembe, BASED focused on the use of Participatory Extension Approaches (PEA) in program needs identification, action planning, implementation, evaluation and report-back (Ministry for Agriculture and Land Affairs, 1998). Putting the “farmer first” underlined BASED programs, where farmers remained central to development programs affecting their livelihood. In describing the “farmer first” concept Chambers, in Chambers et al, (1989) asserts that “With
farmer first, the main objective is not to transfer known technology, but to empower farmers to learn, adapt and do better…”(p. 182).

To be effective and sustainable, PEA-BASED required the support of decision-makers at national, provincial, regional, and local levels. Consequently, PEA-BASED training programs involved all levels of management in the Ministry to increase awareness about the program, but also to ensure provision of appropriate program support. From 1998 to the present, the Ministry documented satisfactory progress from PEA-BASED (Ngomane, 2000), using as a criteria the level of extension staff development, their use of participatory learning methodologies in program planning and implementation, farmer involvement, and community program ownership. Evaluation reports from both extension staff and the clients informed the departmental progress report.

Through BASED, exchange programs with neighboring countries including Zimbabwe, Namibia, Kenya, and other provinces were supported to expose farmers, researchers, extension agents, and management to participatory extension approaches and methodologies in smallholder agriculture. These programs further served to empower participants and encouraged program ownership. PEA programs such as BASED addressed the extension system and approaches used for service delivery. The operational framework also required some adjustment following the “farmer first” principle, entailing decentralization of services closer to the clients.

The structure and functions for the Ministry were reviewed and decentralized to the regional and sub-regional levels. Instead of separate professional lines of management at the provincial level, the new structure emphasized integration of extension and research services at regional and local levels of governance. Program managers had to relocate from the provincial to the regional headquarters. The Ministry assumed that a decentralized structure would reduce the hierarchy in communication as well as promote better client collaboration at regional and sub-regional levels. The impact of this new development remains to be seen, especially the ability and willingness of senior officials to physically relocate from the provincial headquarters and to delegate authority to the lower levels of governance.

Conclusions

The traditional public sector extension system in the Northern Province is struggling to cope with the challenges of a system undergoing transformation. This conclusion is supported by the high turnover of political and administrative leadership, 92 percent of the budget devoted to personnel, and lack of capacity to support the emerging/commercial farmers despite a favorable policy environment. There is need for political stability, consistency in administrative leadership, and deliberate efforts to strengthen the capacity of extension agents to serve better the smallholder farmers. Decentralization and integration of services to regional and local level will serve that purpose, for it is at these levels where empowerment of smallholder farmers would be most visible.

The PEA-BASED reorientation program aimed at putting the “farmer first,” and thereby rendering extension more responsive to client needs, can improve public sector extension services in the Northern Province, and indeed, throughout South Africa. In addition, strengthening the institutional capacity of African smallholder farmer organizations to better articulate their needs as they lobby government, the private sector, research institutes, marketing institutions, donor agencies, and other role players in the agricultural sector could support programs such as BATAT. It is our view that farmers, extension agents and government are striving to succeed in the young democracy and they can, with better collaboration and teamwork.
References


