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Search for Better Institutional Arrangements for Agricultural Extension Services in a Decentralized Context: The Republic of Benin

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Abstract

The process of decentralisation and privatization of agricultural extension services in Benin must take into account important issues such as the new actors, including agricultural producer organisations, private sector and NGOs, the reduction in the power of high level extension administration, active participation or stakeholders in the financing of extension service, financial and technical assistance from the State, particularly for resource-limited communes, institutional changes that are adapted to both decentralisation context and local management capacity. In the new decentralised system, agricultural extension needs to be flexible and avoid hierarchical structures. Most of the staff should be in the communes and should be oriented towards enhancing the capacity of farmers and the elected local governments to participate in the process of solving their problems and reach their development objectives, including financing of agricultural extension services. To achieve all this, adequate decision-making power and resources for extension activities should be transferred to commune level. The experience from Benin indicates the difficulties African countries in general, and Benin in particular, will face when trying to better tune extension activities to local needs.

Keywords: Agricultural Extension, Decentralization, Farmers’ Organizations, Financing, Participation, Privatization.
Introduction
Agriculture is the foundation of the economy in Benin. It provides about 70% of export incomes and 40% of the Gross Domestic Product. Agricultural development activities in the country, including extension and research activities, are funded by public funds and donor agencies. For decades, all agricultural development activities in Benin, including extension services, were exclusively carried out by the government through its Ministry of Agriculture. However, since 1989 when Benin accepted the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) and engaged in a democratization process, extension institutions have been going through a restructuring process. This restructuring process has two main components: (1) the transfer of commercial activities to farmers through their organizations, and (2) the focussing of extension activities only on information provision and training of farmers. Due to the process of democracy and the liberalization of the economy, extension activities are no more the exclusivity of the government. NGOs, private and professional organizations are now all engaged in extension provision.

Recently, decentralization has become a reality in Benin since local governments have been democratically elected. Such a radical political change calls for a rethinking of extension organization in Benin. The necessity of transforming agricultural extension services to meet the requirements of the new political, economic and social contexts in Benin is the central argument of this paper. It explores the chance of survival of public extension services in the decentralized context.

Evolution of Agricultural Extension Organizations in Benin
A comparative analytical framework was used to outline the evolution of agricultural extension organizations in Benin. The framework, as depicted in Table 1, includes seven criteria: (1) the objectives of the extension services, (2) the functions carried out, (3) the extension approaches used, (4) the extension delivering methods, (5) the organizational structures of extension activities, (6) the origin of the extension demands, and (7) the quality of the Village Extension Workers. Finally, four different periods are taken into account in the analytical framework, including the post-colonial period (before 1972), the revolution period (1972 to 1989), the early structural adjustment period (1989 to 1996), and the liberalization period (1997 to date).

Although attempts have been made, as shown in Table 1, to make public extension services more professional, to liberalize extension provision, to give more responsibilities to farmers and to improve the methods of problems identification, the culture of the public extension services has not changed significantly since they still work with the same extension personnel without additional training (Tossou, 1995 & 1996; SPORE Magazine, 2005). Extension agents at lower levels do not have the necessary power to quickly respond to farmers’ needs. The lack of additional training does not enable them to use participatory approaches in problem identification, programme planning, implementation and evaluation.

However, the involvement of the farmers in extension planning has been improved since 1997 when participatory approach was introduced in the extension process to improve the problem identification process. This approach is called Approche Participative Niveau Village (APNV). It consists of proactively involving the beneficiaries at the local level from problem identification, planning, implementation and evaluation of impact. It enables communities to define their demand for local development support (Chabeuf, Toledano & Bouarfa, 2002).

NGOs and private cotton companies (e.g., inputs suppliers and cotton ginning companies) are now also engaged in funding extension services. They finance the
recruitment of extension agents who are managed by the public extension services. However, in reality it is a public-private partnership in the delivery of extension services.

Table 1

*Main Characteristics of Various Forms of Agricultural Extension Organization from the Post-Colonial Period to Date*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Objectives</td>
<td>Feed the needs of French industries</td>
<td>Ensure export incomes and food sufficiency</td>
<td>Transfer of commercial activities to farmer’s organizations</td>
<td>Improve extension impacts and effectiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functions of (public) extension services</td>
<td>Research, inputs supply, Extension, marketing of cotton</td>
<td>Supply of inputs &amp; credit, Extension, marketing of cotton, regulation of agricultural production</td>
<td>Extension, regulation, training</td>
<td>Extension and regulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approaches</td>
<td>Commodity approach</td>
<td>Integrated Rural Development Approach</td>
<td>Training and Visits (T&amp;V) System</td>
<td>Village-level participatory extension approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods</td>
<td>Groups through demonstration plots</td>
<td>Individuals and groups methods</td>
<td>Contact groups approach on a fixed calendar</td>
<td>Demonstration units, contact groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational structures</td>
<td>Hierarchical</td>
<td>Hierarchical</td>
<td>Hierarchical with norms to meet</td>
<td>Hierarchical with norms to meet privatization and professionalization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Origins of the demand</td>
<td>Market-oriented</td>
<td>National goals-oriented</td>
<td>Technology-oriented</td>
<td>Problem-oriented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of VEWs</td>
<td>Level 1</td>
<td>Level 1</td>
<td>Level 1 mainly &amp; Level 2</td>
<td>Levels 1 &amp; 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Four levels can be distinguished among extension workers as follows: Level 1: Primary school + nine months of professional training in agriculture related fields; Level 2: Primary school + four years of professional training in agriculture related fields; Level 3: Level 2 (or four years of general education in secondary school) + four years of professional training in agricultural related fields; and Level 4: five years of university training (agronomists).
The extension delivery system seems to be moving from one extreme to another. It is moving from a monopoly by public sector to the domination by NGOs, professional and private institutions. This changing context calls for a new partnership between the key actors in the extension delivery systems, including farmers’ organizations, public agencies, private institutions and NGOs. The question is: are these various actors prepared for a sustainable intervention in the field of agricultural extension? This question is based on the fact that the quantity of extension personnel has decreased since the introduction of the SAP. Table 2 shows the agricultural extension staff situation in Benin between 1999 and 2005 based on projected total staff need of 903, 231 and 77 for Village Extension Workers, Subject Matter Specialists, and Farmers Organization Specialists, respectively during this period. Besides, agricultural extension services are handicapped financially, and do not have adequate human resource capacities.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of Extension Staff</th>
<th>1999</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Village Extension Workers</td>
<td>488</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>903</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject Matter Specialists</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>184</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farmers’ Organization Specialists</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>749</td>
<td>467</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>411</td>
<td>1,211</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The figures were calculated based on various reports by the Ministry of Rural Development, Republic of Benin.

Decentralization: Implications for Organization of Agricultural Development in Benin

Decentralization is the process through which, the State delegates part of its administrative activities to elected local government (World Bank, 1997). Decentralization aims at a better tuning of public services to the preferences and demands of local people. In Benin, according to Tossou (1997), three outcomes are expected from the decentralization process: (1) a large citizens participation in public affairs; (2) a behavioural change from the side of the population which must learn to mobilize their own resources instead of counting solely on the state; and (3) the mobilization of the grassroots around appropriate development objectives which guarantees local participation (i.e., the organisation of local development). To facilitate behavioural changes in the new context, motivation, competence and room to manoeuvre are critical factors that should be taken into consideration (Tossou, 1995).

In such a context of decentralization, characterized by an increase in the decision-making power and capacity at grassroots level, a strongly hierarchical extension services geared towards export crops is no longer relevant. It requires (1) devolution of power from the side of the upper bureaucracy—officials working at the national and regional administrative structures—to the level of the communes (the equivalent of districts) where the administration is no more ruled by officials appointed by the national government but by local elected officials, (2) relevant participation mechanisms to ensure better response to grassroots needs, (3) increased capacities to mobilize public and donor funds to finance local development, and (4) a flexible and progressive transfer of technical and financial responsibilities to decentralized entities. In fact,
decentralisation needs a change in behaviour and attitude.

*Devolution of Power from the Upper Bureaucracy to the Local Level*

Decentralisation calls for democratisation and promotion of development at local levels by elected persons. However, most of the specialised administrations in Benin have not yet reviewed their intervention strategies in line with the requirements of the decentralisation process. Decision-making processes are still highly influenced by public administrator and politicians at national or regional levels. This is consistent with experiences in other developing countries. For example, Van Dusseldorp (1995) has noted that in Sri Lanka and Nepal, decentralisation did not lead to such power transfer. Influence of technicians and politicians at the national level had remained strong in the decision-making processes. Upper administration was not motivated at all to transfer the relevant power and resources to local administrations.

*Participation Mechanisms to Ensure Better Response to Grassroots Needs*

Participation is a concept with different meanings for different people depending on the development approaches, perspectives and ideologies which support the participation process. However, according to Pretty and Vodouhe (1997), two kinds of participation can be broadly distinguished: (1) interactive participation and (2) partial participation. Interactive participation is a process through which individual actors or groups are directly or indirectly involved in all the steps/phases of interventions that affect their lives, from projects identification to actions evaluation. Participation is called partial when the concerned actors are not really involved in one or more steps of the intervention or extension process. Whatever its nature, participation may be spontaneous or induced, that is, the participative initiative may be internal or external to the concerned groups.

For an effective decentralisation process to occur, participation should be the nerve centre. Participation is crucial to the achievement of the development objectives of local entities with the limited available financial and human resources. This requires an effective participation of the local entities in the formulation of extension’s objectives and plans. The APNV Extension approach in Benin is a valuable tool. But, an evaluation of its implementation indicates the necessity to improve the technical, organisational and communication capacities of the personnel in charge of its application. Relevant platforms are needed to guarantee active participation of the local people and an identification of actions that go beyond the construction of infrastructures.

*Capacity of Local People to Mobilize Internal and External Resources to Finance Local Development*

The promotion of local development in the decentralised entities needs the mobilisation of local resources and state subsidies to compensate for the transfer of some of the domains of interventions (such as social and economic infrastructures, education and primary health care) formerly carried out by the national government to the local elected officials at the level of the communes. Currently, the capacity of mobilising local resources by decentralised entities is low. Administrators in the various government ministries at the national level are not willing to transfer resources related to the transferred competences to local level. Therefore, elected officials at the local level should find ways and means of accessing additional resources from donors. However, they lack the expertise in dealing with donor agencies.

Improving the capacity of local governments to mobilize the necessary resources on one hand, and the competence of local people in controlling the action of
the local governments on the other, will be a critical factor in ensuring the effectiveness of the decentralisation process. But, how can African countries in general and Benin in particular make such a jump? This calls for the necessity to introduce change, not only in the public administration, but also in the attitude and behaviour of local people. Attitudinal and behavioural changes need time and energy, but past experiences have shown that changes are taking place so rapidly in developing countries in such a way that they are leading to failures (Van Dusseldorp, 1995).

Transforming Agricultural Extension Relevancy to Benin

On the basis of the requirements for an effective assistance to the decentralisation process and the various experiences in extension organisation in Benin, some characteristics of the required extension services are proposed and argued. The key concepts arising from the discussions above are the need for (1) relevant assistance to local governments, (2) training to increase assistance capacity, (3) increasing participation, and (4) raising required resources to finance extension activities in a situation in which that state’s contribution is decreasing.

Relevant Assistance to Local Governments

Extension activities must be tuned to the concrete needs of the decentralized entities for reaching their development goals. This assistance to local community has to go beyond simple technical assistance. Social and economic aspects have to be taken into account by extension services to meet the current needs of local people and government.

Coping with the new context of decentralisation requires a rethinking of extension approach. Technical, social and economic information are crucial to enhance the capacity of local governments to assume their new roles. It is necessary to shift from a more centralized and directive, top-down extension organisation to a more decentralized and interactive one. The level of such decentralization should coincide with the level of decentralization at the level of the communes. The communes have legal political autonomy. Public extension institutions at commune level are the secteurs agricoles. As such, actions and strategies must be designed in each of the secteurs agricoles in accordance with the needs of the local population. The secteurs agricoles should be responsible for the rural development in their areas.

Two-fold contractual extension should be developed by local extension institutions: contract with the communes on given objectives and assistance on the one hand and contract with the extension headquarters at regional level on the other. With the communes, activities have to be negotiated and, in the long-term, additional resources provided by them through their development plans. Extension headquarters should, in the medium-term, provide the secteurs agricoles with the required running costs, and extension agents would be judged largely on the basis of their results. But, in the long-term, the secteurs agricoles must generate additional resources to improve the working conditions of extension workers. These resources may be derived from refunds that farmers associations and agricultural products exporting companies or bodies would pay to these secteurs agricoles as subsidies for their contribution to agricultural development. Such subsidies are actually being paid in Benin, but they are used mainly to recruit extension agents.

The importance of these subsidies depends on the efforts of public extension bodies to raise agricultural production level. These additional resources of the secteurs agricoles could also be derived from the ones that the communes have mobilized in the frame of the implementation of the planned activities related to agricultural production. To make such resources sustainable, extension agents should not only contribute to increased agricultural
production, but also raise the living conditions of farmers - that is, to help the communes achieve their development objectives in the rural sector.

To achieve the relevance of the assistance to local governments, it is important to provide more power and resources to the secteurs agricoles (i.e., autonomy in making their own decisions and allocating resources). Such power provision may enable extension personnel at local levels to take relevant decisions and actions. It may also make them more responsible and increase their concern and commitments for agricultural development. The feasibility and sustainability of such decentralization of power and resources call for a political will on the side of the authorities of the Ministries of Agriculture and Finance since the actual resources which have to be transferred to local governments following the competences’ transfer have not yet occurred.

Training to Increase Assistance and Technology Generation Capacity at Local Levels

Decentralization of extension activities as a way of tuning extension offers to the needs of farmers at local level through the APNV approach needs new skills, including technical, human relations, critical thinking and problem-solving skills necessary to work effectively with farmers as individual and groups in the rapidly changing and complex agricultural environment (Knipscheer, Zinnah & Mutimba, 2002; Zinnah, Steele & Mattocks, 1998). These skills, which are necessary for better generation and dissemination of technologies at local levels, are related to aspects such as diagnosis and prioritization of problems, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the relevant actions.

The required competences must be at the level of the secteurs agricole instead of the regional level. In fact, in the prevailing situation, an average of more than 50% of the extension personnel in a given region is working at the headquarters either as extension officials, technical support staff, or as administrative staff. Such human resource allocation patterns have led to complex administrative and bureaucratic structure to the detriment of efficiency. Therefore, there is a need for reversal. Most of the extension personnel have to be present at local level. But, as has been demonstrated earlier in this article, the present situation in the field of extension is characterized by inadequate number of qualified extension workers. Thus, there is a need for competent extension workers since technical competence is necessary for credibility and consideration from the side of the local people in a truly decentralized extension context.

Increasing Participation to Extension Planning at Local Levels

Participation is critical in tuning extension activities to local needs. According to Schmidt (1998), the following factors are important for enhancing genuine participation: (1) climate of trust, (2) codetermination concerning financial resources, (3) sufficient technical competence, (4) accountability of extension agents to their clients, and (5) application of the subsidiary principle through which people give mandate to their own elected colleagues to take care of certain aspects of their common benefits and interests. However, trust cannot be built if the extension agents are unable to respond in due time to farmers’ needs. Extension agents should have the necessary power, autonomy and flexibility in planning their work. Trust can be increased and reinforced only if the extension agents are accountable to farmers or at least to the local elected governments. This means that, in the long term, extension services have to be transferred to the local government level. Thus, the extension personnel should be paid by the budget of the communes. Resources needed by the communes to meet such obligations should
be provided by the state and local revenues. Such transfer of power and competence should be done progressively. In the short-term, local governments can plan such extension activities in their development plans and look for the financial resources needed for their implementation.

There are still strong farmers’ associations in Benin, although their importance and power have decreased with the decline in the price of cotton—the country’s major commercial crop—on the international market in the last five years. However, there is a lack of transparency and renewal of committee members in most of the farmers’ associations. There is a kind of monopoly of the associations by their group leaders. Therefore, building a countervailing power structure within farmers’ associations is very vital today for transparent and efficient management of these associations. Such an objective may only be achieved if the training goes beyond the leaders and also addresses the building of the capacity of the members of the farmers’ associations.

Raising Required Resources to Finance Extension Activities

Resources needed to finance extension activities in the decentralized context may come from many sources, including farmers’ organisations, the private marketing companies and ginning industries, the communes and the state. Experiences with cotton production in Benin, has shown that farmers’ organisations and the private marketing and ginning industries are able to finance agricultural extension services. This needs political will, a better management of the resources of these farmers’ organisations, and the development of the so-called filières (the organization of the chain of activities from production, processing and marketing including the various necessary support systems) in order to diversify the financial assistance of the private institutions to extension services. Promising marketing chains do exist. Cashew, soybeans and cassava, for example, are gaining new interests in Benin and can be valued along with the well-known maize production which has not been well-organised till now.

The communes legally have the competence to mobilize internal and external resources. Internal resources may come from local taxes. Elected local government officials should find ways to increase the level of mobilisation of such resources. Certainly, the communes may not count solely on this internal resource in the short-run. They have the possibility to negotiate additional resources from various partners to finance local development programmes. For that, they need to elaborate their development plans in order to convince donors on the fact that the extension activities, like the other, have been designed by the beneficiaries themselves, both directly or indirectly through a subsidiary process.

Conclusion and Implications

The creation of new patterns of government by transferring various administrative functions to the communes through the decentralisation process calls for a new step in the decentralisation of agricultural development. Extension services should be part of the decentralization and devolution agenda, engaging the full involvement of local government units and grassroots organizations (Rivera & Alex, 2004). Decision-making power and financial resources should move from the national and regional levels to the local levels. Also, technical competences and qualified extension workers are more needed at the level of communes than the national and regional levels.

The communes as well as the farmers’ associations have to learn to mobilize internal and external resources to finance agricultural extension services (i.e., to take over the salary and running costs of extension institutions and make their personnel accountable to them). All of these require a political will, particularly at the
national level, to really support the process. The experiences in Benin suggest that the decentralisation process has created the conditions to better tune extension services to the local needs. However, there is still the need for more flexible institutional arrangements and the political will to take advantage of the opportunities created by this new context.

The reluctance of national officials to fully devolve political and financial powers to the local level is a strong sign of the difficulties African countries in general, and Benin in particular, will face in the process of tuning the extension activities to the decentralized context. The goal of organizing an effective decentralized agricultural extension system in Benin is yet to be achieved. This dream requires clear vision, dedication and skillful management (Rivera, 2003). This goal also requires committed and approachable leadership capable of transforming vision into action, of devolving power and authority over financial and human resources from the central government to local levels, and enabling the beneficiaries to access the right kinds of information at the right time in a user-friendly manner for proper decision making (Zinnah, 2003). The authors share the view of Annor-Frempong (2003) that the greatest challenges to extension service delivery in Africa are unlikely to be addressed fully by decentralization unless there is greater participation of users in the financing and control of the extension service providers.

References


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