Managing Public Sector Extension Organizations: Some Critical Issues

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Abstract

In developing countries public sector extension is at crossroads. The changing world environment which focuses on production and productivity is demanding that public sector extension matches up to those criteria. The paper examines public sector extension management using Buford, Bedeian and Linder’s five functions of management; namely, planning, organizing, staffing, leading and influencing and controlling. Critical issues regarding each of the functions are discussed using examples from the Caribbean Agricultural Extension Systems. The paper concludes with some suggestions for addressing the some of the issues raised.

Introduction

In most developing countries agricultural extension is managed by the public sector or the State. The exception exists where there are commodities geared for the export market. In such instances, privately managed extension organizations are engaged. In the last decade, the world economy made a major shift towards free trade. Production, productivity and competitiveness became key words which drove the emerging free market economies. Many extension organizations began questioning their age long mission of improving the quality and standard of living of rural people. With this broad scope and limited resources, extension organizations found themselves not delivering to the many expectations. Governments and funding agencies were also asking questions about level of spending and impact of public sector organizations. This situation was even more acute in countries which had both systems of extension organization, public and private. In most of those cases private sector extension was delivering greater benefits to improve both quality and standard of living. Why then are private sector extension organizations being able to meet their clientele expectations while public sector extension is failing to meet their goal? This paper will first take a look at extension management and then address some critical issues facing public sector extension organizations in the English speaking Caribbean; and then finally, conclusions will be presented.

Extension Organizations

Extension organizations like most organizations possess both formal and informal structures designed to carry out tasks in fulfillment of goals. The creation of a structure which ensures that individuals can interact at both formal and informal is a precursor for the achievement of extension’s goals. In the formal situation, task oriented management styles are generally utilized; and in the informal setting, relationship oriented styles are preferred. Management styles should therefore reflect the reality of the management situation. Structure and management styles are key factors in the successful achievement of extension’s goals.

Extension management (Buford, Bedeian and Lindner, 1995) comprises five functions: (1) planning, (2) organizing, (3) staffing and human resource management, (4) leading and influencing, and (5) controlling. In public sector extension organizations in the Caribbean the performance of these functions are done mainly
at two managerial levels; top management and middle management. In the execution of these management functions managers of extension organizations perform several tasks. Van Den Ban and Hawkins (1988) described three tasks for the effective operation of extension services. These are:

1. Making decisions regarding goals
2. Management of resources and manpower
3. Overseeing the execution of programmes

Management of Public Sector Extension

To highlight the critical issues of public sector extension management, the five functions of management, as presented above, will be addressed.

Planning

Planning as a management function positions an organization to make the most effective use of its resources and the environment in which it operates. Extension planning in public sector extension organizations, because of its attachment to a wider organization, should therefore take place within the framework of this wider organization. Extension organizational objectives must therefore relate to the overall Ministry’s plan. In the Caribbean the planning process encounters several problems. Two such outstanding areas are the managerial personnel involved in the planning process and the lack of a clear mission statement.

Managers are generally appointed because of their skills in interpersonal relationship and their ability to conceptualize situations which will put the organization on a path to success. In the Caribbean public sector extension managers are appointed because of their technical ability or their academic qualifications. In an FAO/UWI survey conducted in three selected territories (Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago and Grenada) only 5.2 percent of the extension managers reported to have received training in management (Campbell & Rajack, 1988). Little attention is given to conceptual skills. In some cases the managers’ training and job experience on the one hand and their academic qualification on the other, are both unrelated to extension. Not only is this a problem in terms of such persons being able to come to grips with extension principles to adequately conceptualize the extension function but also in terms of motivation of staff. This paper is not purporting that someone who is not trained in extension would not be able to carry out the extension planning function but it is erring on the side of caution and actual experiences in the Caribbean which is pointing to this deficiency. In the cases referred to, the general sentiment expressed by front line extension officers is that of a belittlement of their profession. Extension officers air the view that this can only occur in extension, for no where within a Ministry’s structure would one find an extension professional heading a department which is not extension related.

In the 70’s and 80’s it was almost impossible to find extension organizations with mission statements. The Caribbean Agricultural Extension Project addressed this situation in the Organizations of Eastern Caribbean States (OECOS). Even where mission statements exist, planning does not reflect the statements. The problem here is the lack of autonomy of extension programmes. In the Caribbean, public sector extension planning is an output of the Ministry’s overall planning and not an integral part of the overall planning of the Ministry. For instance, a Ministry, without consultation with extension, will decide to grow onions and request of extension to plan for its production. Onion now becomes part of the overall planned activities of extension. If however extension was given the autonomy to consider onion production in its programme a different result may be obtained because of factors which extension will normally consider in its planning process; for instance, willingness of farmers to grow onions, availability of land.

Public sector extension plans reflect a lack of understanding of the extension environment. The lack of clientele involvement in the planning process is evident. There is generally a sentiment among other units within the Ministry’s structure that the needs of farmers are
well known and that there is no need to consult with farmers in the development of programmes. This sentiment has now infiltrated the ranks of extension. For instance, at a recently conducted Participatory Rural Assessment in St. Lucia (Campbell, 1998) extension officers were reluctant to participate because they felt that the exercise was a waste of time.

The planning function is key to all the other management functions. It carries a certain kind of primacy (Buford, Bedeian and Linder, 1995). In the Caribbean, public sector extension planning is generally done by persons lacking the conceptual skills to position the organization to make the most effective use of its resources and its environment; as such, the other functions of management are usually adversely affected.

Organizing

Public sector extension organizations in the Caribbean usually have flat structures, consisting of a top level manager, the head of extension; middle level managers, the regional or district heads, and the front line officers. The structure is generally a reflection of the small size of the countries. Such structures allow for easy communication between the different levels; however, in public sector extension organizations in the Caribbean the distance is amplified by the physical isolation of the offices and the officers in their respective work area. In recent times, efforts are being made to remove this isolation through the upgrading of the offices and office facilities; for instance, the installation of telephone lines and computers.

In the Caribbean also, there is generally a lack of appreciation of the authority which goes with extension managers. This generally comes because of two factors: the lack of recognition of extension as a profession and the general inexperience of the managers themselves. What flows out of this situation is an extension manager with little power or no capacity to influence. This weakening of the capacity to influence impacts negatively on the authority of managers resulting in a weak overall extension structure. In an extension organization, the authority of the managers hold the structure together; and since this authority is lacking in Caribbean public sector extension organizations, most structures are weak.

In fact, the overall performance of public sector extension organizations can be tied to the question of extension authority. Managers in a situation where authority is undermined or weakened generally tend to renege on their responsibility and accountability. In the Caribbean, there is a general lack of responsibility and accountability among extension managers.

Extension by its very nature depends on a source or sources of information. Extension structures should be so designed to allow for coordination or easy access to resources both within the broader framework of the Ministry and beyond. Structures should allow for interaction, because the organization is not just a formal structure, it consists of people, a social system. (Albrecht et al, 1989). Public sector extension organizations in the Caribbean tend to operate as islands. Poor structural linkages with other units is the norm and there are few mechanisms in place to access the other resources that are outside its structure. There is also need for extension organizations to maximize the human resource potential within its own structure.

Staffing

Once a structure is in place and the organizational objectives are known, then management should put in place a mechanism for the hiring of staff. In public sector organizations, extension managers have little to do with the process of hiring or even firing. In the Caribbean, hiring falls under the purview of the Public Service Commission, an organization which constitutionally falls outside the control of government, but in practice is greatly influenced by it. The Commission hires based on a job description handed to it. In general, extension managers do not have a say in the writing of job descriptions to fit the type of personnel most needed for staff within the extension structure.

Then again, persons enter extension through the ‘back door’. Such persons are hired as
temporary staff without the necessary qualifications to enter the system; work for a few years, and then get hired. Although a mechanism of probation is in place, most public sector extension organizations do not use the mechanism. There is generally no assessment of the extension trainee to ascertain his or her suitability for the system. In response to this limitation an orientation programme was developed (Campbell & Saska 1994). The programme although attempted by some Ministries in the Eastern Caribbean was never institutionalized. Over the years such persons were not able to benefit from training because of their lack of qualification, and their ability to move through the system was severely limited. Where such situation occurs, conflict between the extension managers and such persons is very common. This creates a demotivating effect which is sometimes filtered through to other persons within the extension system, which finally leads to poor staff performance.

There is also the ability of public sector extension organizations to prepare itself for the future. The fact that extension planning is usually done by persons with limited knowledge of extension, the development of futuristic plans or strategic plans do not always occur. Structures, with the necessary staff are not put in place to position extension to take advantage of the changing environment. For instance, globalization and its effect were talked about in several fora, the need to have farmers adopt a business approach to farming was also well discussed; however, most extension organizations did not see the need to employ persons with farm business orientation to strengthen their staff or to put in place structures to have staff gain experiences in farm business management.

Leading and Influencing

Public sector extension managers because of their training and orientation are not adequately prepared to be good leaders. However, some have managed to learn on the job and have used their experience and seniority to establish the necessary authority to gain respect. In the OECS older heads of extension commanded greater respect and were able to hold the extension staff together. Their departure left a vacuum. The younger managers although more qualified were unable command the same respect. Generally, they did not devote enough time to the social needs of their staff.

Extension managers are also limited in the types of support they can give to their staff to satisfy their needs. Campbell (1992) in working with extension staff of the Ministry of Agriculture in Belize found that the number one need was training. Public sector extension managers do not have full control over who receives training and what type of training their staff receive. In fact, this is one area in which the authority of extension managers is undermined. For instance, it is not uncommon for the extension managers to learn through indirect sources of their staff being awarded scholarships to go on training courses.

Controlling

In extension management, controlling refers to the monitoring and measuring of accomplishment. In public sector extension organizations this is a major area of concern. Extension managers and staff are not generally accountable for the results of their efforts. Their positions are protected by their tenure in the government service.

In the 1980’s the Caribbean Agricultural Extension Project attempted to introduce performance development conferencing among extension organizations in the GECS. Its introduction was met with partial success. Some extension managers resisted the effort. The process brought out several areas of weaknesses in extension managers and some managers were not prepared to make the adjustment.

Conclusion

Public sector extension is now at crossroads. It has to deliver to stay alive. Governments are now questioning and reviewing the operations and management of extension services. They are exploring options. Some are actively pursuing the privatization model. There is therefore urgent need for extension to show impact. In the development of its objectives and programmes
public sector extension needs to take on board new strategies to actively involve its clientele. In keeping with this new thought extension organizations must be more transparent and as such more accountable.

The need to reach out and be more collaborative is also apparent. Extension organizations cannot exist by themselves but in association with others. Their structures and functions must reflect this reality. At the same time restructuring and retooling within public sector extension should not be unique to extension. Other units within Ministries should also undergo changes.

Extension managers must now truly take on the role of managers and cease to challenge their subordinates in terms of their technical skill. They ought to pay much more attention to their functions as managers.

Reference


