COMMENTARY

INTERNATIONAL AGRICULTURAL CONSULTANTS: A PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

A consultant is a contracted, self-motivated individual who gives experienced and skilled advice or service in a field of special knowledge or training. Agricultural experts contemplating being a consultant need to think about the modus operandi they perceive themselves impersonating. This paper reflects a perspective for recruiting qualified consultants; assumptions; essential qualifications required of consultants; accepting the terms of reference; getting the work done; working with counterparts; maintaining meaningful communication with colleagues; giving answers; disparities between the international consultant and national counterpart; commitment to established project goals; working for, working with, and being with people; and resources for carrying out agricultural education programs in other nations.

Introduction

A British agricultural volunteer who traveled to the Philippines to work at a Catholic parish was given the following advice:

If you are here because you pity us; if you came because you think you have the answers to our problems; if you expect that, after two years, you can look back to a project which YOU have established, then there is no place for you in the parish. But if you are here because you have unanswered questions of your own; if you have come to give as well as to receive; if after two years you will be happy to leave behind farmer-friends who have become more self-confident and proud as human beings and as farmers because of the friendship you have shared with them, then please stay with us (Tiongco, 1994, pp. 2-4).

The expectations portrayed by this advice caution consultants to think about the modus operandi they should embrace while working in other countries. This paper presents my perspective of a modus operandi and the essence of details that could increase the likelihood of agricultural consultants leaving behind self-confident friends, farmers and/or researchers.

Consultant

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) defines a short-term consultant as “…a contracted employee appointed to serve less than one year in a cooperating country” (USAID, 1981, p. 1). A consultant is a self-motivated individual who gives experienced and skilled advice or service in a field of special knowledge or training (Johnson, 1982, p. 9). According to Metzger (1993, p. 13), “…the role a consultant must play is to look past the obvious symptoms to identify the root cause of the mismanagement; then to develop solutions that call for dysfunctional behavioral and value modifications that are acceptable to the perpetrators!” While...
accepting USAID’s, Johnson’s and Metzger’s varying interpretations of consultants as being germane to international agricultural education, extension and research, agricultural consultants need to understand the nature of the consulting profession. In my opinion, agricultural consulting is more than giving advice and making money. It’s a process and a professional service that evolves around humanity’s unsteadiness, uncertainties, and insecurities inherent in working with people immersed in development programs.

Karlson (1991, p. 8) wrote that consultants “...are usually perceived as outsiders working on the inside.” Karlson’s interesting perception applies to both international and domestic agricultural consultants. On the basis of what Johnson, Metzger and Karlson indicate in their writings, consultants are outsiders who work on the inside as problem-solvers, idea persons, devil’s advocates, hatchet persons, task masters, processors, implementors, catalysts, advisors, stabilizers, listeners, talkers, specialists, generalists, managers, motivators, and as quasi-employees who work alone or with the client’s staff. They also assert that international consultants must speak the technical language of both government and industry.

Implication

Professional agricultural and extension educators and researchers participating in international consultant assignments help to enlighten and enhance the wisdom of their institution’s approach to education. Consultants learn to appreciate and understand the characteristics of other cultures; learn to speak another language; acquire financial resources for their institution; recruit international undergraduate and graduate students; enhance their institution’s image and advance its capability to participate in long-term projects abroad. Furthermore, they bring back to their college classrooms first-hand experiences and knowledge that address severe food shortages, unrestrained livestock diseases, raging insect infestations, creeping desertification, unsparring deforestation, uncontrollable soil erosion, to name just a few of the critical issues that affect the well-being of our fellow human beings. Eleanor Roosevelt said, “Understanding is a two-way street.” International assignments can have a two-way impact on the agricultural educator’s and researcher’s understanding of people and their respective societies.

Assumptions

An assumption often made is that the skills required to be a successful consultant are the same as the skills required to be a successful educator. While there are some similar attributes of the two pedagogues, there are also some obvious differences. According to Metzger (1993, p. 14), “…consultants do not have the authority required to implement their recommendations.” Metzger’s assertion especially applies to international assignments. International clients can do one of two things with a consultant’s agricultural recommendations. They can either accept or reject the recommendations.

Another assumption made by educators according to Metzger (1993, p. 13) is “...all you need to know and bring to the client is your expertise in your field.” Nothing could be further from the truth, especially for international agricultural consultants on the continents of Africa, Asia and South America. One needs to be a “jack of all trades”. However, being a “jack of all trades” can risk one’s credibility.

When consultants do not have the agricultural background or experience to give an acceptable solution or recommendation to specific questions or problems, it is more in accord with the mores of most societies to say “I don’t know” than to pretend to know the answer. People will usually sense that the consultant is pretending. This results in her or his credibility being jeopardized immediately.

The notion that agricultural consultants using participatory and farmer-first rhetoric would reveal a discipline committed to gender-sensitive development is not accurate according
to Walker (1996, p. 248), who claims that “...participatory and people-centered development as practiced by international agricultural and extension educators does not necessarily include women.” Walker (1996, p.250) asserts further that “...international and extension educators may be familiar with and talk about women and development but that does not mean they operationalize that understanding.” Agricultural consultants need to abandon their attitude towards gender bias if Walker’s claims are accurate.

Qualifications

Agricultural educators and researchers who desire to do consulting work need to satisfy three basic criteria before considering overseas assignments. They must like people, get along with all kinds of people, and have a compassionate attitude towards helping people help themselves (Diamond, 1987, p. 23; 1984a, p. 22). In addition, there are three broad qualifications that greatly enhance the effectiveness of consultants: much practical experience complemented with advanced academic credentials in the technical area as defined in the job description (Erickson, 1983, p. 23); previous overseas experience in other nations (Lee, 1987, p. 20); and ability or desire to speak the host country’s national language (Lee, 1987, p. 20).

Beyond these qualifications, the consultant must possess three important virtues, namely patience, persistence, and perseverance (Diamond, 1984b, p. 1). These three virtues are cardinal prerequisites for Metzger’s (1993, pp. 14-15) eight personal traits that clients expect and assume to be an integral part of the consultant’s repertoire. They are:

1. Empathy (ability to relate to issues of concern).
2. Energy (stamina, fortitude, and spunk to implement change).
3. Ethics (purity, decency, impartiality, respect, and honesty).
4. Positive thinking (optimism in the face of despondent situations).
5. Self motivation (inner urging and encouragement).
6. Team player (sharing and working with others).
7. Self-fulfillment (jubilation for client accomplishment).
8. Mobility (flexible and willing to travel).

Ideally, educators who possess most of these traits can be effective agricultural consultants.

Terms of Reference

A contracted consultant must thoroughly understand the terms of reference as determined by the host nation and/or contractor. The terms of reference usually describe the job assignment. The consultant has the professional responsibility to accept the job description and not attempt to amend it without first obtaining the full authorization of the contracting organization.

Counterparts

When counterparts are assigned to a consultant, the terms of reference should describe the role of each person. It may even be necessary to clarify specific roles. Clarity of the roles for both the consultant and the host country counterpart is essential. Counterparts are not to be made to feel like bystanders. They need to be an integral part of the project and should have equal if not more responsibility than the consultant. Riggan (personal communication, April 29, 1972) once instructed a cadre of new Peace Corps volunteers “Your mission here is to work yourself out of a job.” Perhaps that’s the mission of agricultural consultants as well: work themselves out of a job.

In the 1970s, assigning national counterparts to work with foreign agricultural consultants became an important component of international agricultural education efforts. Counterparting in the 1990s still remains a significant component of effective consulting work.

Counterpart Comprehension
Agricultural consultants must be cognizant of the fact that counterparts are generally knowledgeable of the characteristics of their society. Effective consultants should have an accurate and justifiable perception of the characteristics that describe both the people and environment they are supporting. Hence, consultants need to confer often with the counterparts regarding the values, mores, expectations, customs, growing season characteristics, soil conditions, crop and livestock pests, and other features of the environment where they are working.

Agricultural consultants must share their experience, knowledge, and skills with counterparts to adequately prepare them for carrying on program or project responsibilities after consultants complete their term. It is imperative that consultants teach counterparts to be competent in carrying on the program unassisted. Agricultural consultants who fail to fulfill this function can cause a well-conceived program to falter after they leave. Such failures may jeopardize the long-range goals of an overall agricultural development program.

Disparities

Normally, there are many disparities between the consultant and the counterpart that can jeopardize their working relationship. The consultant who is sensitive to such differences can handle the issue pragmatically. Disparities include marital status, gender, educational level, salaries, work experience, work ethics, superstitions, material wealth, and religious views, to name a few. Counterparts frequently perceive agricultural consultants as having access to tremendous wealth merely because they come from a more affluent nation. This perception can be correct when compared with their local economic standards. Agricultural consultants need to deal with this issue diplomatically so as not to jeopardize the intent and quality of the working relationship (Diamond, 1984b, p. 1).

Commitment by the agricultural consultant and the counterpart to the goals of the sponsoring organizations and the project result in a meaningful working relationship. Differences in commitment to established project goals can rapidly lead to a breakdown in communication and cooperation. Mutual dedication and commitment are like a team of horses pulling together. Pulling together towards a common end can generate a positive interaction that conceivably could go far beyond the overall intent of the project.

Communication

In his views of the consultant and counterpart relationship, Ascroft (1971, p. 7) stated, “Courtesy requires that honored guests in African countries not be criticized; the result is lack of communication between technical assistance personnel and local nationals, that can seriously hamper development projects.” Within the context of Ascroft’s view, the consultant has the professional responsibility to look beyond this facade and initiate efforts to maintain meaningful communication with the assigned counterpart. Positive interaction and communication are essential to achieve the project goals described in the contract.

Responsible consultants are sensitive to the cultural background of the local counterpart and people. Here is an example of how lack of such sensitivity can affect relationships and the project. A short-term consultant in Swaziland was teaching an introductory computer course. As most instructors do in America, he openly praised certain people in the course when they satisfactorily achieved a specific skill. In the Swazi culture, such an act of praise is not readily accepted by peers. It caused envy, dissension, jealousy, and discord amongst class peers that ultimately jeopardized the course objectives. Efforts to learn the cultural characteristics of both the counterpart and local society can enhance the likelihood of successful experiences.

Getting The Work Done
Agricultural consultants recruited from academia usually possess specific knowledge and/or skills requested by host nations. However, for various reasons, agricultural educators and researchers tend to have a strong temptation to focus on getting the work done. Consultant job descriptions frequently describe a work load that is often far beyond what is feasible in the described time frame. Tiongco (1994) addressed this issue in the following statement:

“Don’t (sic) be a TOB (Task Oriented Bastard). Don’t come to our countries with the objective that after your term of service, YOU shall have left behind a project or programme (sic) that YOU have established and can boast about. If this is what YOU are going to do, there will be no guarantee that the scheme will survive successfully after YOU leave. ...under-achievement of objectives may be preferable if, during the time in the country, more importance is placed on the transfer of and growth in knowledge and skills. And of even greater value is that friendship with people will help them grow stronger, more confident, and proud of the color of their skin, the shape of their nose, their race, and culture” (Tiongco, 1994, p.3).

If Tiongco’s statement is true for the majority of nations involved with development projects, consultants on long and short-term assignments need to heed the essence of his concern.

Answers

Personal observations made in other countries disclose that agricultural consultants tend to find it irresistible and more desirable to give answers to questions or solutions to problems. Instead, it is probably more important to help people to think through their questions, identify alternative solutions to their questions, discuss the ramifications of the options, then allow the people to answer their own questions and take responsibility for their choices. Consultants who give the answers or solutions must take full responsibility for their many ramifications. As a matter of course, consultants should not be perceived as knowing all the answers. Sometimes the best answer may not be proposing a solution, but discussing the question with counterparts and local people to simply understand. Finally, consultants should thoroughly understand the question before responding. This is an idealistic perspective, and sometimes not a very practical outlook. Nevertheless, consultants who align their endeavors with this idealistic approach, when feasible, will increase their probability of achievement.

Presence with People

Karlson (1991) described presence with people as (a) working for people, (b) working with people, and (c) being with people. According to Karlson, working for people has generally dominated past development efforts in other nations. Target groups are normally identified, and fore-ordained project objectives are implemented by long-term and short-term foreign experts with the assistance of counterparts. Generally, the target groups have little or no input in developing the project objectives or perceived outputs (p. 9).

Working with people means assisting people and waiting for them to define their needs, and then supporting their objectives and action plan. It involves the consultant entering into a trusting relationship with people, surrendering one’s autonomy and sense of power and together identifying what really needs to be done (Karlson, 1991, p.9).

Being with people means experiencing in one’s own life what it is to be poor and oppressed. It means living in a village scenario, setting aside one’s own agenda, work plans and strategies, and simply feeling with the poor their situation. Because of the time restrictions of a consultancy, it is difficult for college educators or researchers to develop an appreciation for the implications that poverty has on people’s sense of themselves, their tensions, the contradictions between poor and non-poor, and to recognize
through this that all of us are a part of the problem (Karlson, 1991, p.10).

Agricultural consultants who lack long-term international experience in the field need to be cognizant of these three dimensions of presence with people. Each dimension has its own unique character that influences the consultant’s reasoning, emotions, attitudes, impressions, opinions, outlook, patience, considerations, and approach to implementing a work strategy.

**Resources**

Agricultural educators and researchers from donor nations are accustomed to having the appropriate resources for teaching effective agricultural education programs. Such resources, to name a few, include modern buildings, salaries, equipment, laboratories, classrooms, office, libraries, electricity, heat, water, desks, chairs, instructional materials, and transportation. However, these resources are often limited or nonexistent in some nations. Consultants should appreciate these limitations and have the creative ability to cope. One often has to make the best of the available resources while still being charged with the responsibility of achieving project objectives.

**Messiahs**

It does not take much to arouse feelings of guilt in agricultural consultants, especially inexperienced consultants, when they experience the burdensome lifestyles of the poor they are to help. Such feelings can cause them to perceive the people as objects of pity and themselves as their savior. Instead, one should hold in esteem the sufferance of people who daily survive poverty and oppression. Generally, people’s pride is at stake when consultants from other nations visit their land because they are not proud of having to live in poverty and oppression. Agricultural consultants need to have the disposition to embrace the poor and at the same time help them to solve problems themselves. For sustainability, people need to have a chance to learn from their mistakes, regardless of the society or socio-economic level to which they belong. Agricultural consultants can help people help themselves simply by pointing out the lessons to be learned from making a mistake.

**Summary and Conclusions**

A reality check shows that USAID will look very different by the year 2000 because of reduced congressional funding. J. Brian Atwood (cited in Walker, 1996, p. 252) current administrator of USAID, in a recent speech to the Advisory Committee on Voluntary Foreign Aid, stated that “...by the year 2000, USAID will have been radically transformed. We started in 1993 with a presence in over 120 countries, with over 70 missions. By the year 2000, our programs will be targeted on approximately 75 countries, with no more than 30 full sustainable missions”. In view of this anticipated reduction in program funds, numerous international education issues and opportunities will still need to be addressed, and international agricultural consultants will have to play a significant role.

There are no recipes for agricultural consultants to follow when performing the duties and roles of a specific assignment. Many personal, governmental, environmental, and societal variables can affect the outcomes of a well-conceived consultant assignment. Inexperienced agricultural consultants need to think about the *modus operandi* they should embrace while working in other countries. The *modus operandi* of agricultural consultants should reflect patience, persistence, perseverance, empathy, energy, ethics, positive thinking, self motivation, team player, self-fulfillment and mobility. One should like people, be able to get along with all kinds of people, and have a compassionate attitude towards helping people help themselves.

People expect agricultural consultants to have much practical experience with advanced academic credentials in the technical area, previous experience in other nations, a desire to speak the host country’s national language and the technical language of both government and
agri-industry. However, when one does not know the answer to a question, one has to be able to say “I don’t know” rather than to pretend to know the answer.

Agricultural consultants must share their experience, knowledge, and skills with counterparts to adequately prepare them for carrying on project responsibilities after consultants complete their term. There can be many disparities between a consultant and counterpart and those who are sensitive to such differences can handle issues pragmatically.

Individuals who lack long-term international experience in the field need to be cognizant of the three dimensions of presence with people: (a) working for people, (b) working with people, and (c) being with people. Each dimension has its own unique character that influences the consultant’s reasoning, emotions, attitudes, impressions, opinions, outlook, considerations, and approach to implementing a work strategy.

Agricultural consultants should be gender-sensitive and help people to think through their questions, identify alternative solutions to their questions, discuss the ramifications of the options, then allow the people to answer their own questions and take responsibility for their choices.

Often, agricultural education resources in some nations are limited or nonexistent. These limitations require agricultural consultants to have creative abilities to cope, while at the same time, have a disposition to embrace the poor and help them to solve their problems themselves.

References


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