IMPROVING AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION
THROUGH A SYSTEMS APPROACH: LESSONS FROM THE
CARIBBEAN AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION PROJECT (CAEP)

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Abstract

The article draws from the experiences of a major extension project funded by USAID which aimed at improving extension services in seven countries in the Eastern Caribbean. It takes the position that the widely accepted success of the project was due largely to the use of a systems framework in conceptualizing the "problem" and implementing solutions. The goals of the project are first outlined followed by discussions on the process of and findings from, situational analyses. These findings formed the basis of Phase 2 of the project which focused on institutional strengthening, training, staffing and the provision of needed resources. The centerpiece of the next phase was demonstration districts aimed at demonstrating how an effective extension system can operate using an optimum resource management approach. Here, as also discussed elsewhere in the paper, the strength of a systems perspective is also quite evident.

Introduction

Improving extension services has continued to present many challenges to national and international agencies involved in such efforts. Approaches in the past have included transplanting models from the "developed" to the "developing countries" and more recently, from one developing country to another, particularly the Training and Visit System. At long last, however, the view that there is no one "best approach" seems to be gaining ground. A recent World Bank document (The World Bank, 1990, p. 6) pointed out that "there can be no universal model, or blueprint for extension" and enunciated four organizational principles, one of which was "situation specificity." Later, the UNDP (United Nations Development Programme, 1991) carried that position a step further and proposed that "the UNDP approach should be to strengthen the existing national extension system... rather than to recommend a totally new approach" (p. 57).

This article briefly discusses the Caribbean Agricultural Extension Project (CAEP) which has been widely regarded as a success. As the discussion will show, CAEP bears out the positions stated in the two documents just mentioned. It was designed to fit the local situation and the overall approach was to strengthen the national extension systems in the project countries. Given the acceptance of the view that the project ought to be situation specific, it soon became clear that it would be necessary to use a "systems framework" to better understand the extension systems and the context in which they were embedded. The paper highlights CAEP's use of the system perspective although other points will become evident. For example it also illustrates the "extension process" at work; the project started with a situational analysis and followed through with the basic steps in extension program development. At each step, too, there was adequate consultation among the external agencies, the local institutions and the beneficiaries.
What does "system perspective" mean?
According to Friedrich and Hall (1990), first, it emphasizes the need to view a situation as a whole and not as separate parts. Holism is, thus, a recurring theme. Second, it recognizes the interactions of components inside the system as well as the effect of the immediate external environment upon the system in the process of transforming inputs to outputs. To extrapolate, if one is attempting to change one component, then it will be necessary to look at interactions with the other components as well as external factors. Finally, the systems perspective also stresses "systems hierarchy", whereby every system is part of a larger system and is itself composed of sub-systems.

**Goal and Purpose**

CAEP was designed and conducted by the following:

(a) the local agency, the Department of Agricultural Extension, University of the West Indies (UWI);

(b) the collaborating U.S. institution, the Mid-West Universities Consortium for International Activities (MUCIA); and

(c) USAID, the funding agency.

Its goal was to improve the economic and social well-being of small-farm households through an increase in the value of agricultural production, increased productivity and the generation of agricultural employment. The purposes were two-fold: to increase the effectiveness of national public and private sector extension systems in bring about farmer adoption of appropriate technologies; and to improve the long-term effectiveness of UWI to support national extension services. At its inception, the project covered Belize and seven Eastern Caribbean States (Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, Grenada, Montserrat, St. Kitts-Nevis, Saint Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines); Belize later withdrew from the project.

CAEP spanned the period, 1986-1989 and consisted of three phases as follows:

1. Phase I, from 1980-82, which was basically diagnostic in nature.

2. Phase II, from 1982-85, aimed at implementing some of the major recommendations from Phase I on improving extension services in the participating countries.

3. Phase IIa, from 1986-89, in which extension demonstration districts were established and the Farm and Home Management Approach was initiated.

**Phase I-Situational Analysis**

As the extension process advocates and in line with what has been suggested by some recent publications on international extension (e.g. The World Bank, 1990; Zijp, 1991), the first step must be to understand what exists - what is the situation and why it is as it is. Thus, situational analyses were carried out in each of the project countries, with special emphasis on national and private sector extension systems and their linkages with other related organizations. These analyses involved consultations with a wide spectrum of organizations and individuals working in agricultural and rural development.

The analyses identified strengths and weaknesses of the systems and developed country profiles on:

(a) human resources - numbers of staff and levels of skills in the organization;

(b) material resources - vehicles, communications equipment etc.;
(c) technical and other support services available to these systems; and

(d) linkages with research and marketing agencies as well as others involved in rural development.

Out of the analyses emerged National Extension Improvement Plans which subsequently formed the basis of Phase II of the project.

**Phase II-Implementing National Extension Improvement Plans**

Phase II concentrated on three major areas: institutional strengthening/building; training; staff positions in critical areas; and the provision of equipment and other material resources.

**Institutional Strengthening**

From the perspective of the project, it was not necessary nor desirable to improve extension services by the wholesale introduction of new models or approaches. Rather, CAEP's approach was to work with the existing organizations, a strategy which has been endorsed recently by UNDP (United Nations Development Programme, 1991). Thus, the project provided assistance in streamlining the operations of extension services, which in many cases led to varying degrees of restructuring within the organizations. In this regard, a major accomplishment was the separation of regulatory functions involving the enforcement of rules, supervision of credit, etc., from extension functions so that "extension staff" no longer had to carry out responsibilities that could conflict with their role as friend/adviser to farmers. There were, of course, a number of other project activities which aimed at streamlining operations, for example, the development of proper job descriptions for front-line and other staff, improvements in supervision and administrative procedures, and the development of improved long-range and short-range plans to guide the activities of extension organizations. For extension in the field to be effective, there must be adequate communications support.

Thus, CAEP assisted in the establishment of national communication units (NCUs) in each of the project countries, as well as a Regional Extension Communications Unit (RECU); RECU's primary role was to coordinate and support the work of the NCUs. The communication units not only assisted in the wider dissemination of agricultural information through print and radio, but also produced visual aids to improve the effectiveness of educational delivery in individual and group settings.

CAEP was also instrumental in the establishment of several formal consultative mechanisms, both at the regional and national levels, to guide not only extension programming, but also agricultural development efforts as a whole. At the regional level, the work of the project itself was guided by the Regional Agricultural Extension Coordinating Committee (RAECC), which met every 18 months to review the CAEP's work and to chart future directions.

The core of RAECC was comprised of Ministry officials and farmer representatives from each country participating in the project. However, recognizing that extension cannot operate effectively in isolation, representation was also sought from other agricultural related agencies in the region. Thus, RAECC did not confine its deliberations and recommendations, to purely project or extension matters, but dealt with other key elements in the agricultural development mix. In a similar proactive vein, CAEP brought together on a regular basis senior officials of research and extension organizations in the region on a semi-annual basis in an attempt to achieve a more effective coordination of their activities.

At the country level, the project encouraged and facilitated the establishment of National Agricultural Planning Committees (NAPC) comprised of broad representation from the public and private sectors to help chart directions for agricultural development in each country. The NAPCs in turn set up sub-committees on extension, research and other
areas to advise the general body. At the community level, district extension advisory committees were formed to advise an extension program.

Training

Since CAEP was conceived as basically a "technical assistance project" the majority of its activities focused on training. While greater emphasis was placed on training the front-line staff since they were the ones in daily contact with farmers, it was recognized that the organizational climate must be supportive for the field staff to put what they have learnt into practice. Consequently, training was conducted for personnel at the middle and upper tiers as well. Training for the front-line staff focused on both process areas - program development, extension methods, group dynamics, farm management - and a wide range of content areas. Most of the training took the form of short courses, seminars, workshops and the like. However, a need for specialized professional training for field staff who had been out in the field for a few years, was strongly apparent. Consequently, a one-year Diploma in Agricultural Extension was established at UWI, with assistance from CAEP who also provided scholarships to students from participating countries. The diploma covered extension topics, community analysis, rural sociology, and communications. Students were also required to conduct a research project on areas of specific concern to their organizations. Extension staff were consequently reminded that they were professionals and thus, they should have a professional approach to their jobs. While appropriate training provided the base for increasing professionalism, it was felt that other measures were also needed. Consequently, the project initiated an Excellence in Extension program, whereby outstanding extension officers in each country were selected and given special recognition. CAEP also encouraged and supported the development of professional associations as a further move to build professionalism in extension organizations.

CAEP was also involved directly in farmer training, particularly in subject-matter sessions on topics such as soil conservation, pest management, and so forth. Apart from the "knowledge transfer" aspects, the aim was also to strengthen the learning process through the active participation of both extension officers and farmers at the same event. Farmer participation was viewed as a key element in CAEP's work plan and thus, training geared at strengthening the group process was conducted for both farmers and extension staff.

Resources

The project provided a few staff positions in critical areas - communications, farm management and marketing - as well as several short-term positions as consultants. However, it was not deemed desirable to fund positions in the Ministries of Agriculture, although staff shortages existed. This was based on concern for the long-term sustainability of the project, and well-founded suspicion that such a move would weaken the existing systems, by pulling staff away from them. That concern, too, was reflected in the initial reluctance to fund equipment and other material resources, which would tend to detract from the technical assistance nature of the project. However, it soon became obvious that the lack of the necessary "tools" to do the job would hamper the progress of the project and thus, communications equipment and some vehicles were provided. Recognizing, also that the lack of mobility of field staff was a basic constraint, the project provided motorcycles in some countries and initiated a revolving loan scheme for the purchase of vehicles in others. The provision of such resources, no doubt, gave a boost to the project through increased political support and greater visibility associated with this exercise.
**Phase IIA-Demonstration Districts**

At the end of Phase II, it was recognized that although significant gains had been made, the changes were rather fragile and thus, more time and effort was needed for consolidation. Thus, funds were made available to continue project activities. However, the centerpiece of CAEP IIa was the demonstration districts which were established in project countries to demonstrate how an effective and efficient extension system can operate using an optimum resource management approach, rather than by depending on a lot of extra external inputs.

The systems perspective was also very much operative in work with the demonstration districts. In an attempt to get a holistic and systemic view of the situation prior to the development of work programs, rapid reconnaissance surveys or sondeos using multidisciplinary teams were conducted. Out of these emerged recommendations for dealing with problems not only for extension, but for research, marketing, and other areas, which constrain agricultural development in the district. Consistent with the rationale for using demonstration districts, the work plans emphasized a Farm and Home Management approach. This approach basically involved assessments of:

(a) resources possessed by the farm family

(b) how those are deployed in relation to the goals of the farm family; and

(c) what technologies could be introduced to improve farm incomes, without impairing other aspects relating to family welfare.

**Beyond CAEP**

Although CAEP ended in 1989, in view of the important changes achieved, a successor, project known as the Agricultural Research and Extension Project (AREP) was developed involving both UWI and the Caribbean Agricultural Research and Development Institute (CARDI). AREP provides an opportunity to continue with some of the activities, although the level of funding is much lower than previously. A new element is the formalization of the research-extension linkage, where both the extension and research institutions were placed together for technology development and transfer activities.

The continuity and levels of funding particularly in the early phases, no doubt, played an important part in the widely acknowledged success of the project. Astute leadership, team work, good cooperation from the Ministries of Agriculture and the participatory style used at different levels were also essential ingredients in the mix. However, the conceptualization of CAEP using a systems perspective, provided the necessary framework within which the other factors could operate. The approaches discussed above, merit serious attention in any consideration of strategies to improve extension services in the less industrialized countries of the world.
References


