NGO-GOVERNMENT PARADIGMS IN AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT: A RELATIONSHIP OF COMPETITION OR COLLABORATION?

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Abstract

Several organizational features provide Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) with an effective bridge between agricultural resources and local communities. These organizational features include effective mechanisms that allow NGOs to embrace more proactive and participatory approaches to agricultural development. This paper reports on a comparative analysis of the organizational characteristics of selected NGOs in Malawi and Zimbabwe. Participatory and proactive organizational features were found to place these case NGOs in unique positions as intermediaries providing feedback and dialogue with farmers. It is through increased NGO-government collaboration that more responsive development models can be achieved to close the gaps between the public-sector agricultural establishment and the resource poor farmer.

Introduction

The predominant linear view of technology transfer is insufficient for addressing complex agricultural problems that exist, especially in limited-resource regions of the world. The continued ingrained belief that agricultural technology is best developed by the researcher, then delivered by an extension agent, and finally adopted by a farmer is a hindrance to poverty-alleviation. The agricultural extension literature is infected with language that reflects the one-way paradigm. Even though most informed writers are making a well-intentioned attempt to incorporate more feedback mechanisms into their technology transfer model, they are unable to move away from their top-down thought processes. One critic recently noted the linear and prescriptive nature of many technology transfer models:

The chain can be quite long. For instance, in the T&V extension model it is assumed that the information flows, in the best of cases, from researcher to subject matter specialists, from them to field level workers (unless the information is transmitted first through an agricultural officer) and then via a contact farmer (hopefully an opinion leader) directly or indirectly to other farmers (Blum: 1991).

One-way paradigms of extension have been thoroughly criticized in recent years (Röling, 1988; Chambers & Jiggins, 1986; Compton, 1984; Mattocks, 1990). According to a World Bank study (1985), inadequate linkages between research and extension establishments are a major weakness of development. Public sector research and extension have had limited success working with resource-poor farmers.

Over the past three decades, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have been recognized by development experts as having a legitimate role in agricultural development. Arising perhaps because of chronic development needs that have remained unmet through existing organizational mechanisms, NGOs are filling a critical niche in agricultural development.

NGOs play an increasingly important role in agricultural research and extension in less developed countries, particularly in localities where the institutional infrastructure is weak. In
these areas, the ability of public sector research and extension institutions to serve poorer farmers and communal holdings is especially limited by inadequate financial support, human resources, and facilities (de Treville, 1991:)

Due to the far-reaching linkages that NGOs typically possess with resource poor farmers and grass-roots organizations, these flexible organizations offer considerable advantages in the area of agricultural development. The NGO community also presents some refreshing alternative programmatic approaches that, when contrasted with the dominant agricultural technology transfer/extension paradigm, can be instructive.

This paper documents the strategic role that NGOs are playing in extension and participatory research. Bridging and networking features that have emerged among the NGO community in the area of agriculture are presented for comparison and contrast to other development sectors.

The paper is an exploratory analysis of approaches and emerging models of extension used by leading NGOs involved in agricultural development in Zimbabwe and Malawi. The paper is intended to assist the reader in visualizing an enhanced role for NGOs in development and how NGOs provide an important bridge between research establishments and resource poor farmers.

Data were gathered from personal interviews, site visits, and documents from selected NGOs. These NGO case documents collectively form a data base for the generation of analyses and conclusions. Organizational features, specifically those related to extension and participatory research, are examined through comparative analysis techniques.

Comparative Analysis

Most NGOs were borne out of philanthropic ideals. These ideals represent a blend of broad humanitarian causes and special organizational interests. A large majority of NGOs who today are focused on agricultural development were originated as disaster-response agencies, formed to function in the area of relief work. As the NGO relief organizations became more experienced, most have made a rapid journey toward offering more development-type programs, including participatory research and extension activities. NGOs realized that a radical shift, away from shorter-term alleviation of hunger and suffering towards longer-term reduction of poverty and inequity, was absolutely essential. In addition to the historic transformation of NGOs from relief to development, other NGOs have emerged in recent years with a primary mandate focused on long-term agricultural development.

The NGOs in Zimbabwe and Malawi, selected for examination in this study, were found to be involved in a variety of agricultural activities. Ventures include food production, processing, storage, utilization, germ-plasm conservation and utilization, produce marketing, horticulture, oil extraction, cash crop production (coffee, cotton, tobacco), poultry, aquaculture, dairy production, credit, water program, off-farm income generation, and training in areas of leadership, facilitation, and management. Few NGOs are involved in all of these activities and most have a subset that fits their individual mandate and program objectives.

Participatory Features: Facilitation & Networks

It was discovered that the NGOs studied in Zimbabwe and Malawi are typically capable of providing many important agricultural services. Their approach was different from traditional research and extension agencies. They tend to favor a more participatory approach to programming and they operate through extensive grassroots networks that allow access to remote geographic areas and isolated groups of people. These two features make NGOs more effective in interfacing with resource poor farmers.
Facilitating the Participatory Approach

The participatory approach to agricultural development modelled by the selected NGOs is significantly different from the predominant technology transfer paradigm. The farmer is not viewed by NGOs as the "end recipient" of a top-down technology delivery process. Likewise, the NGO agricultural development worker is not characterized as a "conduit" for conveying information generated by institution-based scientists down to farmers.

Rather than formulating a pre-packaged prescription for farmer problems, the more effective NGOs are embracing a collaborative and jointly diagnostic process. Farmers, including those who are categorized as resource-poor, are regarded as valued partners with NGOs in the development process at all levels of intervention: need assessment, program planning, experimentation, technology development, program implementation, and evaluation. The partnership model entails giving considerable decision-making control over to the farmers, including the ability to influence the allocation of available resources. Several NGOs in Zimbabwe are involved in participatory approaches to research and extension. The Organization of Rural Associations for Progress (ORAP), ENDA (Environment and Development Activities), and Selveira House were selected as case studies. Each of these three NGOs are engaged in participatory forms of research in several areas of agriculture. Research, involving such areas as the identification and preservation of indigenous varieties of seeds, is conducted through their organizational networks in Zimbabwe. One Zimbabwe NGO, ENDA, has made research an integral part of all projects. Each ENDA division is actively engaged in a continuous cycle of research and monitoring.

In many NGOs there is also a strong linkage between extension and research, again in contrast to the usual formal system of operating them as separate services. The potential advantage of links are well known: reducing the number of stages between the farmer and the technology being developed, improve in the possibilities for communication between farmers and those serving them and increasing the emphasis on adaptive or applied research.... On the balance it appears that NGOs are in a good position to employ participatory approaches in agricultural research. However much appears to depend on their long-term aims particularly with respect to empowerment of their collaborating GROs (grass roots organizations) (Wellard, et al., 1990: 8-9).

An operating philosophy characteristic of NGOs was revealed in an interview with ORAP's administrator Livion Njini. He said "Projects are not ORAP's objective, they are only a means. People have to discuss and arrive at their own solutions."

"Self directed development is not easy, for our people had been conditioned to believe that they are not able to think for themselves and were not allowed to take part in decisions and discussions about their lives. Therefore, unless they take control of their development process, in terms of how and who should do it, development cannot take place.... Development is a process of articulation and participation. This is the starting point, and the end product of development is the persons themselves; knowing what they want and act to get it. ORAP staff do not determine what the people should do but help to formulate their wishes into positive action.... ORAP gives people a chance to discuss their development. It should not be an outsider to decide for them but for the outsider to assist with the expertise required of ORAP members (ORAP, n.d.)."

Often NGOs will utilize local practitioners from the village to facilitate participatory research. For example, Selveira House selects "Area Field
Promoters". When farmer groups are ready, neighboring groups join together in an informal co-operative and appoint a volunteer secretary ("Area Field Promoter"). Upon election, the Area Field Promoter's expenses are paid by Selveira House. (Röling: 1988) Selection of local village practitioners is also encouraged in the ENDA model of development. Village-based researchers live in villages and collect data on issues, ranging from wood-fuel to biomass. In addition to the village based researcher, ENDA also employs Community Workers who assist in organizing village meetings and do extension activities with farmers. Similarly to the Selveira House and ENDA model, ORAP employs field workers chosen by their local communities.

They (field workers) are nominated by their local communities, umbrellas, and associations and then a special meeting of people from all three levels is called, and each candidate presents him/herself. They then leave the room and the participants ... discuss the relative merits of the candidates and choose one of them to be their field worker. They are chosen on the basis of "their willingness to serve other people, how they carry themselves with other people, their respect for other people ..." They were obviously considered proven leaders by the communities well before their election (ORAP, n.d.).

### Utilizing Grassroots Networks & Linkages

Many effective NGOs perform their work through a web of local organizations, commonly referred to as networks. For NGOs without a pre-established web of grassroots organizations, networks are sometimes created through the networking of individual projects.

Networks may reach only a selected geographic region or may be so expansive that they extend throughout an entire country. Even though networks have highly variable characteristics, the ones most used by NGOs have some identifiably common features. Most networks involve linkages with, and between, local organizations. Some NGOs connect with pre-existing local organizations, but often formation of new local organizations is necessary. For example, local agricultural cooperatives, self-help groups, village committees, or irrigation associations may be born out of the activity of an NGO.

It is linkage with, and between, local organizations that is the fundamental characteristic allowing effective NGOs to make a difference in the lives of resource poor farmers. In the process of cultivating local organizational linkages, NGOs can also link with government research and extension organizations, universities, and other organizations that are not easily accessible to members of local organizations. Examples of NGO activities in Zimbabwe and Malawi succinctly illustrate some unique networking features.

The Christian Service Committee (CSC) maintains the largest network of resource poor farmers in Malawi. The CSC is an indigenous NGO that was ecumenically organized in 1968 when the Protestant and Catholic Churches of Malawi joined forces to serve the rural poor. The CSC represents an expansive network of synods, dioceses, churches, and prayer houses throughout Malawi. As a grassroots NGO, the CSC has responsive networks that provide avenues for the active participation of rural resource-poor farmers.

Although government research and extension organizations almost invariably find it difficult to get the desired participation by resource poor farmers, some NGOs are able to attract a significantly higher level of interest. An example from Malawi illustrates this distinction.

The Malawi government has investment considerable resources to implement numerous studies targeting the needs of resource-poor farmers. Typically, research teams solicit survey information from farmers in their fields. This type of assessment is expensive and often yields limited results that are relevant to the resource-poor farmer's situation.
The CSC measured farmer needs by sending a simple survey questionnaire through their farmer network. The response was unexpected. Documents from farmers and groups of farmers (often written by a literate relative or acquaintance), describing their farming problems and potential solutions, were received from throughout Malawi. Even though some may not be satisfied with their scientific rigor, the CSC example illustrates the power of an NGO network to interface with resource poor farmers.

In Zimbabwe, two NGOs developed complex networks involving local community organizations and resource-poor farmers. Fourteen associations were formed from more than 300 local level groups by ORAP. Several village groups evolved from existing women’s clubs (ORAP, n.d.). These associations undertake development activities with facilitation by ORAP.

Selveira House has created a networked system through the mobilization of farmer groups in affiliated churches. As these farmer groups developed, they "... came to be formed around 'natural' affinities of friendship, neighborhood, clan or family rather than religious affiliation, and appointed a committee of its best farmers who arranged the loan, bulk ordering and marketing (Röling: 1988: 159)." These farmer groups often, on their own initiation, formed into cooperatives. Selveira House has been able to effectively offer training, field days, and competitions through the cooperative structure.

**Proactive Features: The Intermediary**

Unlike public sector extension establishments, the NGOs studied were more proactive in initiating interactions with farmers. Instead of just promoting adoption of new technologies delivered by the research establishment, NGOs functioned more as intermediaries and advocates for farmers. Rather than visualizing the farmer as an end-user, NGOs treated farmers as collaborators in the development learning process. Farmers were also considered to be partners in the development and refinement of agricultural technology, information, and policy.

Zimbabwe NGOs have demonstrated leadership in several areas of national agricultural technology and policy. Both ENDA and ORAP members have influenced decision-making in the Ministry of Environment and Tourism and the Ministry of Lands, Agriculture and Rural Resettlement. For example, recent Zimbabwe government policy favored the use of high yield seed varieties. Members of ENDA documented the value of indigenous varieties, presented the results to government officials, and were able to influence policy decisions.

ENDA has also demonstrated a proactive stance by facilitating formation of a seeds network involving selected NGOs in participatory research, collection, and distribution of indigenous varieties of germ plasm. The seeds network manages its own seed bank and has been integral in demonstrating the value of many of the indigenous varieties.

**Conclusions**

An innovative model of agricultural development is steadily evolving and maturing among NGOs in Zimbabwe and Malawi. The NGO model is complex, but has at least two definable characteristics. It is participatory at the grassroots level and proactive at the institutional level.

The NGO development model is clearly different from the dominant agricultural extension, or technology-transfer, model. Table 1 is intended to represent several perspectives and their respective roles as they are overlaid on each of the two development paradigms. The real world is rarely so starkly dichotomous as it appears when represented in comparative tables as the one below. Information in the table will be instructive if it is remembered that each paradigm lists generalizations that fall at opposite ends of a gradual continuum.

The approach of a change agent, acting as an intermediary, can be radically different
depending on an organization's structure and philosophy. If an organization is predominantly oriented to a technology transfer paradigm, a change agent's role will be reactive. Actions of the change agent will be primarily influenced by the introduction and promotion of new technologies. The job of the change agent is to eagerly (or not so eagerly) transport a designated technology (or technology package) to farmers for their rapid adoption. If, on the other hand, an organization's paradigm is oriented toward service of farmer needs, and participation in the working of local organizations, the change agent's role will be more interactive. Efforts of the change agent will, especially during early stages of program development, be focused on cultivation of a co-learning partnership with farmers. In the process of facilitating collaboration with farmers, a change agent will assist local organizations with research and assessments. The change agent will support farmers' learning by enhancing their capabilities to identify and acquire knowledge and technologies (usually various combinations of local and introduced technologies) that address locally identified needs.

Because NGOs adopt a participatory-proactive model they become effective brokers, often mediating (or bridging) between public sector agricultural institutions and their farmer members. The bridging feature puts NGOs in a unique position to feed-back the necessary knowledge and technology to research scientists. Feedback is essential for researchers, especially those operating at locations where they have little direct interaction with farmers.

The Need for Greater Collaboration

Although it might appear impractical for public sector research and extension agencies to adopt a participatory-proactive model, it is possible for the public sector workers to more diligently listen to the issues and needs expressed by the NGO community. "The area of NGO-Government relationships is decisive for the strategic development and impact of NGOs. To achieve wider relevance, and to gain replicability for their initiatives on large scales, NGOs must influence government bodies, local and national (Cernea, 1988)."

It is through collaboration, rather than competition, that both the public sector and the NGO community can work towards more responsive development models. As proactive brokers of agricultural technologies, NGOs enhance change agent integrity and help build trust with farmers, thus establishing the likelihood of more interactive extension opportunities.
Table 1

The Perspectives of the Development Paradigms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perspective Roles</th>
<th>Technology-Transfer</th>
<th>Participatory-Proactive</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Farmer</td>
<td>Recipient</td>
<td>Partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change Agent</td>
<td>Conduit</td>
<td>Facilitator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Method</td>
<td>Reactive/ Selling</td>
<td>Interactive/ Brokering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher</td>
<td>On-station (unless adoption problem)</td>
<td>On-farm (unless responding to farmer as co-learner)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management</td>
<td>Top Thinks; Local Acts</td>
<td>Thinking and Acting at all Levels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vision</td>
<td>Top-down</td>
<td>Shared</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approach</td>
<td>Prescription</td>
<td>Participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>Summative</td>
<td>Formative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cost Reduction</td>
<td>Farmer Satisfaction</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is evident that NGOs have almost all the qualities that are associated with the ideal development strategy as defined by hundreds of international conferences concerned with development in the Third World. The point we are making here is not only that NGOs are much more efficient and effective than governments, a point that everybody takes for granted, but the fact that governments stand to benefit tremendously by allowing private and voluntary efforts to take root in society and thereby provide effective entry points for public sector inputs (Hyden, 1983).

The advantage of collaboration was recently cited by a public sector extension practitioner from Zimbabwe. A donor had approached the government extension agency with an offer of funds for an agricultural project. However, some government workers practitioners familiar with the local situation contended that the donor should channel funds to a local NGO instead. "If the donor gave the money to us (government agency), it would have been tied-up in our bureaucracy for years. However, if the donor gives the money to a local NGO, they can begin to implement the program tomorrow, and we can work collaboratively with them by sharing our expertise."
Collaboration combines the enhanced program flexibility and responsiveness of the NGO community with expertise of public sector institutions. In addition to the benefits from collaboration, NGOs offer shared vision, inspired commitment, and dynamic leadership to complement the public agencies. Adding NGO practitioners to public sector policy making boards and committees will enhance representation and dialogue. As previously indicated, the pay-off for public sector policy makers who listen to NGO leaders is extremely high. Responsive agricultural policies and practices can only be implemented if leaders listen and learn from those who represent the needs of resource poor farmers. As intermediaries, NGOs serve as forceful advocates for change at the grassroots level. They often bridge the huge gap between public sector research/extension and the resource-poor farmer.

The important contribution of NGOs in agricultural research and extension is not well documented. As a result, many public sector extension practitioners underestimate the capability and capacity of NGOs in agricultural development. Unfortunately, the existing literature on NGO extension fails to adequately demonstrate their potential for proactive development, participatory research, and networking. This study analyzed selected NGOs in Zimbabwe and Malawi, and discussed an emerging model for increased collaboration with public agencies.

It is commonly known that NGOs contribute to organizational capacity by stimulating action at the local level. They are effective mobilizers of people through voluntary groups for self-reliance and self-development (Cernea, 1988). In contrast to the predominant technology-transfer paradigm of development, NGOs do not overly focus on supplying technological, informational, and financial inducements development. Rather, NGOs seek to partner with people, create a co-learning capacity, and cultivate a local environment that might stimulate development through empowerment that accompanies local ownership. Among Zimbabwe's Shona-speaking NGO community, the phenomenon of self-development is called "zenzele" (or "self-reliance").

References


