

ENHANCING CAPACITY BUILDING IN AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION SERVICE DELIVERY IN NIGERIA: A REVIEW OF CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract

This paper examines the vacuum existing in the capacity development mechanism as it is currently operated with particular reference to the changing role of agricultural extension delivery in Nigeria. It highlights poor funding, weak training arrangements as a result of bureaucracy and faulty indices of performance as characterizing the system. Some key submissions on enhancing the capacity of extension delivery in Nigeria includes the need to return to competency based approach of extension delivery, improved structure for networking among professionals, updating a curricula for training, developing responsive policies to guide extension education, stepping policies to guide training facilities available to professionals and the need to harmonize all of these in periodic extension summits. Capacity development must be holistic if it is to be effective and sustainable. There must be an articulation and deliberate intensification of training as a means of sharpening the cutting edge of extension service delivery in Nigeria.

Introduction

The 21st century has ushered in an era of accelerated development. This is described by Pretty and Chambers (2000) as bringing in a growing strength of a new worldview in agriculture. The Transfer of Technology (TOT) has been an integral component of this development process. In the Transfer of Technology paradigm, scientists make research decisions and technology is developed in research stations and handed to extension to pass to farmers. Under this arrangement, the role of extension is relatively simplistic in scope.

Recent trends in agricultural development appear to be simulating a shift in the role of extension from the simple channel that it is which is largely reactive, to a proactive and deterministic role in technology development and transfer. Interest in contemporary issues like the environment, farmer safety and health, biotechnology, conflict and social harmony, etc. have necessitated a continuing rise in the

proactive of the agricultural extension system. This situation has implication on the coping capacity of the current agricultural extension arrangement. There is more than ever before a need for greater capacity to cope with this role modification.

The institutions within Nigerian agricultural extension system, whether at the policy academic, or field levels must be positioned for a deliberate reform to accommodate the rising challenges. What obtains at that moment is that many agricultural extension institutions, within universities, research organizations, or extension agencies, are characterized by restrictive bureaucracy (Diamond, 1999; Pretty and Chambers, 2000). Performance according to professionals norms, instead of effective output are used as criteria for appraising success. The extrinsic motivation required for today's extension worker to perform is thus compromised to upholding of norms. Worthy of mention is that, high performance by employees can be achieved and sustained

if emphasis is placed on training and re-training to equip extension personnel to make them suitable for organizational requirement.

Capacity and Human Development in Agricultural Extension

The crux of the malfunction of various agricultural development approaches in Nigeria can be traced to an inherent lack of capacity. The various constituent elements lack the ability to cope with the challenges that development efforts bring. The research element is plagued with lack of a facilitating environment that has the inherent wherewithal for sustainable solutions to farmers' problems. The policy environment has been characteristically unstable and amoebic with regards to issues begging for definite and consistent positions. For instance the extension system on its own part has not been able to provide the stimulating effect it is known for elsewhere in the world.

The victim of the outcome of this unpleasant scenario in the system is the farmer. While the farmer is central to the system, it is the performance of the other elements that is key to moving the sector forward. The farmer must depend on a solid research and extension background to function efficiently.

The common streak to the inability of the capacities of the various elements in the Nigerian agriculture, to contain the current pressure, is definitely in human development. As a concept *human development* places development at the services of peoples' wellbeing rather than at the services of development per se. it attempts to build the individual not just a service tool. It implies empowering extension agents to make choices and

determine directions in relations to intra-professional preferences for service delivery. The actual situation on ground however leaves little to be desired. Chazari and Mohseni (1999), in describing the problem, blamed the situation on inadequate financing of the agricultural extension system. Further to this, Swason (1997) also maintained that extension systems generally do not have a well-defined system of human resource management to keep personnel trained and professionally competent. Extension systems fail to accomplish goals not because the personnel are not familiar with the philosophy and working concepts of extension but because of deficiency in the ability to keep up to date with trends in the agricultural system and farming system they are meant to serve. However, an effective retraining programme can help close deficiency gaps by equipping personnel with modern trends in the system, especially when jobs change due to transfer or promotion or when new skills must be learned, because of change introduces by advancing technology. Lawal (2000) pointed out that there has been an increase in the number of institutions providing training in agriculture in Nigeria. These are supposed to cater for the serious dearth of manpower in quantitative and qualitative terms. Institutions in themselves do not hold an absolute key to bridging the capacity gap in the extension system. There must be a framework that facilitates the use of these institutions for upgrading the skills of serving professionals. Such framework must also address the instruments for equipping new entrants into the profession in a sustained manner.

Proposals for standardization

In addition to the generalist nature of extension work, there is need for a competency based approach described by Diamond (1999). It is a system in which the

learner is taught to be competent in performing relevant skills and tasks. It tends towards specialization and encourages expertise in handling techniques and issues around the relevant or specific discipline. Crop specific extension workers handling specific crops are likely to be more apt at the job than generalists. They are also likely to access and gain good mastery of materials and methods of extension related to their specialized area. This level of extension practice should have a background of a few years of a cognate experience in general extension. Furthermore, a vibrant professional body like the Agricultural Extension Society of Nigeria (AESON) can be backed by law to monitor extension practice and to organize training in the form of workshops, seminars on modern information gathering, presentation skills, customer-client relationship and ethics among others. So that in addition to encourage specialization, the professional body can also train and equip professionals for the Agricultural Sector. The rationale for extension professionals learning from other professionals allows for extension workers to visit other agencies to share contemporary extension approaches with peers, this synergy offers opportunity for information sharing for the overall betterment of extension practice. There must be a formalization of practical networking among field workers and other extension professionals. This, among other things must be an integral part of determining the rating of practitioners in the field.

The curriculum that is used for training, even at the pre-service level, begs for urgent review to meet current requirements in the practice it is an acknowledged reality that updating curricula can be a daunting task exercise. To address these, the FAO has published a training guide to help educators involve clients in curriculum development (Etling, 1999). The curricula of agricultural

extension in universities, institutes, and colleges must be reviewed immediately to accommodate contemporary issues in the field.

Conclusion

This paper acknowledges the various fragmented efforts being made but recommends articulation and intensification of training as a means of sharpening the cutting edge of extension service delivery in Nigeria. There is the dire need for wholistic approach in tackling the deficiencies currently inherent in the machinery for providing and sustaining workers in the extension service delivery system. Effective extension delivery is sine qua non to a review and harmonization of present efforts and it must harness inputs from all stakeholders in the system.

Recommendations

From the policy viewpoint, there is need for educational planning and policy that will prepare the nation to enter a clear vision of priorities in agricultural education and human development both at the pre-service or in-service (Linley, 1999). This policy should provide for a system that is responsive to the rapid changes in agricultural technology, extension methods and the farming environment.

There should be periodic convening of a National Agricultural Extension Summit. Such summits should involve all stakeholders (farmers, researchers/scientists, field agents, consumers of agricultural produce, policy makers, NGOs and CBOs, etc). The summit will, among other things provide a comprehensive review platform for the national agricultural extension system, assess performances and set working goals for extension in Nigeria. It is an extension summit that stands to keep the profession abreast with trends in

development on the one hand and adapt it to demands by such changes.

In-service training, for field staff, should be a professional requirement instead of privilege. It is a basic prerequisite that ensures optimal performance of extension professionals. Obinne (1992) described it as a means of improving agent's performance and further added that the periodic evaluation of agricultural programmes and the activities of extension workers is necessary for any appreciable improvement if food production efforts will be made and sustained.

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