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RE-FRAMING ZIMBABWE'S PUBLIC AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION SERVICES: INSTITUTIONAL ANALYSIS AND STAKEHOLDERS VIEWS

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1. INTRODUCTION

Agricultural extension programmes are in transition worldover (Harter, 1992; Rivera, 1996 and Carney, 1998). Governments and international agencies in both the north and south have been implementing structural, financial and managerial reforms in their quest to provide improved agricultural extension services. Individual reform options include reducing the scope of state financing in those areas where the private sector may be willing to participate or beneficiaries may be willing to pay, and improving cost-effectiveness of remaining services by improved priority setting procedures, making services more user-oriented and responsive to demand, improving the management of available resources, and improving the efficiency of service delivery (Agritex, 1999). Examples of countries where traditional extension services have gone through some degree of transformation include the UK, New Zealand, Mexico and Costa Rica, where transitional measures have ranged from decentralisation and participation by stakeholders to cost-sharing and complete commercialisation.

This paper reviews various stakeholders' views and critically analyses implications of commercialisation of agricultural extension services on the performance and development of the agricultural sector within the context of a developing nation such as Zimbabwe. Either way, the commercialisation and/or privatisation of publicly funded agricultural extension programmes are relatively new processes and their effects on the long-term sustainability of agriculture within a country are uncertain (Hall & Kuiper, 1998). Consequently, an in-depth analysis of the processes and their long-term consequences on agricultural productivity, viability, and social well being is essential before initiating such plans.

2. EXPERIENCES ON COMMERCIALIZATION AND PRIVATISATION

The transformation of the New Zealand extension service provides one good example of successful re-orientation (Hall & Kuiper, 1998). The transition from

a public service to a commercialised system (user-paid consultancy) and later to a privatised (privately owned) service was in line with economic reforms meant to reduce an overwhelming national debt. During commercialisation, farmers came to terms with the fact that services would no longer be free and began to shop around for best value extension services. Consequently, the demand for private advisors increased and many of them left the public extension service to become private agricultural consultants. Implementation of advice and adoption of new technologies also increased compared to the period when services were provided “free”. However, estimates indicate that the overall numbers of farmers presently receiving extension services is well below the number prior to commercialisation of the services. The take-over of extension services by agro-processing and marketing firms in Argentina is another case example where the private sector could deliver efficiently and profitably. As a result of the take-over, milk production increased by 65 percent per cow, and butterfat yields per hectare by 111 percent (Schwartz & Zijp, 1993).

However, the road to commercialisation and privatisation has not been all rosy. Because profitability is the main criterion for private extension providers, their tendency is to cultivate a clientele of commercial farmers. The Chilean experience illustrates this problem. Chile has been the leader in privatisation in Latin America. According to Umali-Deininger (1997), when Chile privatised its extension system, commercial farmers were not seriously affected, but small-scale and subsistence farmers were priced out of the extension market. To remedy this inequity, the government had to take active measures to target extension services to these farmers. A review of the Chilean experience also revealed that after three years, both farmers’ and private consultants’ interest in the programme declined.

3. AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION IN ZIMBABWE

3.1 Historical background

In Zimbabwe, agricultural extension was introduced by Emory D. Alvord in 1927 when he started out with nine agricultural demonstration workers (Alvord, 1958). Later, the Department of Conservation and Extension (Conex) and the Department of Agricultural Development (Devag) were established. The former had the institutional mandate to provide advisory services to white large-scale commercial farmers, while the later was meant to service native smallholder farming communities. At independence, in 1980, the Department of Agricultural, Technical and Extension Services (Agritex) was formed as an amalgamation of Conex and Devag. Agritex, by policy design, has concentrated its efforts to provide agricultural extension services to the smallholder-farming

sector as an institutional mandate, while servicing large-scale commercial farmers on request.

3.2 Institutional objectives and approaches

Agritex's mandate is to provide general extension services and train farmers in the use of new technologies, with the aim of increasing productivity while maintaining the sustainability of the agricultural production base. There are several operational objectives which include; the identification of farmer groups for appropriate extension effort, the promotion of training schemes particularly for farmers with limited resources, the creation of environmental awareness amongst all land holders, and assisting farmers in solving their own problems and furthering agricultural development.

Agritex uses a variety of extension approaches to service farmers. These include the use of the Master Farmer training approach, group development areas comprising general development interest groups, commodity interest groups, demonstrations, competitions, field days, study tours and individual farm visits. For some time, an attempt was made to use the Training and Visit (T & V) system. The approach is basically an extension management system, introduced and supported by the World Bank. The system was, however, abandoned after 10 years of practice after evaluations found that it was inappropriate for a nation where resources are limited, the farmers are more generalist in their activities and the bio-physical environment make the strict following of time-tables impossible (Hanyani-Mlambo, Forthcoming). Agritex also offers its services free of charge to other government agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and private companies that have projects in the rural areas. Agritex provides logistics, technical advice and mobilises farmers. Recent attempts at Farming Systems Research (FSR) approach were futile, while participatory approaches are still at "preaching" stage. A consistent refrain from all farmers also seems to suggest that the extension agency does not have much new knowledge to transfer to the farmers.

4. COMMERCIALISATION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE AGRICULTURAL SECTOR

In Zimbabwe, and most countries worldwide, agricultural extension has been viewed as a public good and has been financed mainly by the public sector. Since 1991 the Zimbabwean government has been implementing World Bank and IMF backed economic reforms. During a period of drastic cuts in government budgets and belt tightening for government agencies, it has been argued that several government services, including agricultural extension,

should be commercialised. The principal question then is; what implications will such a move have on both the large scale and smallholder farming sectors?

4.1 Anticipated positive impacts

The rationale for providing public funded extension services on the basis of cost and delivery effectiveness is that it would lead to an efficient service and promote a profitable agricultural production at least cost to the taxpayer. In other words, commercialisation of the extension services is expected to bring about not only a reduction in government expenditure but also improvement in efficiency and cost effectiveness of provision of such services.

In line with privatisation ethics and efforts to improve on efficiency Agritex can scale down its services to give room for more services from the NGOs and private companies. Enhanced participation by NGOs would avail alternative extension services, while the entrance of private players is likely to create a competitive and conducive atmosphere for improved service provision. This is also likely to introduce attitudinal changes within the parent extension agency. A potential positive impact in this regard is a change towards a higher degree of professionalism and commitment within the extension system. Extension will be pro-active and more farmer-oriented, which does not only remove the element of blanket extension coverage that is not targeted, but also introduces the issue of sensitivity to the needs of different farmer clientele. Thus, extension services might become more purpose-specific, target-specific and need-specific. Since farmers who benefit from the extension service would pay for the cost of the service, farmer clients will have a say in the determination of extension programmes that meet their needs, as they will be paying for these services. This may also make farmers face the economic realities that influence business decisions and introduce an entrepreneurial attitude in emerging farmers.

4.2 Potential problems

Several factors determine the scope and feasibility of providing cost and delivery effective extension services in both the large scale and smallholder farming sectors;

- i) *Willingness to Pay:* The introduction of cost recovery measures might reduce the demand for extension by the agricultural industry. Zimbabwean farmers have from time to time indicated that Agritex is not providing new technologies. Most of the recommended technologies are considered to have been tried and found either inappropriate or unprofitable for their socio-economic conditions. Farmers might not be

willing to pay for these recommendations. Also, given the current manner in which extension services are provided (blanket recommendations), individual farmers might not be able to identify the benefit that accrue to them exclusively to be willing to pay for it. In a review of the implications of commercialisation of the British extension service, Harter (1992) also expressed concern that extension systems currently supported by public funds may generate strong resistance to commercialisation proposals due to a long tradition of "public service" agricultural extension service provision.

- ii) *Ability to Pay:* Another concern is the amount that farmers who are currently receiving free public extension services might be willing to pay for the services once they are commercialised. Based on a 1984 study of the Israeli agricultural extension system, Dinar (1996) estimates this amount to be US\$32 per visit. Commercialised extension also requires different packages of services to different client groups, which might increase the cost of extension. In any way, the level of production and income generated in Zimbabwean smallholder areas are too low for farmers to be able to afford to pay for any extension services. This view is supported by Umali-Deininger (1997). Several studies in Zimbabwe have shown that the average per capita income from production and remittances is below Z\$1 500 per annum. Low-income small farmers constitute the bulk of smallholder farmers. Research findings have shown that even in high rainfall areas income levels are low (Mudimu, 1998). In general most farmers do not have the means to pay. The potential hitch, then, is that the goal of full cost recovery might not be met.
- iii) *Equity:* In general, high charges for extension advice may drive away farmers from seeking knowledge and information. However, more worrying is the fact that this may marginalise the bulk of smallholder farmers who may not be able to pay for the services. Commercial agencies do not always provide services on an equal access basis. Service provision tends to focus on clients where profits, and thus user fees, can be maximised. In situations where farmers are illiterate or do not have access to alternative extension services, it would mean the farmers would have no choices thereby forced to consume the only service offered or withdraw from using the service.
- iv) *Diversified Extension Focus:* In Zimbabwe, and many countries within the developing world, agricultural extension work includes community development activities. Thus, although focusing on agricultural

extension, Agritex's services are also aimed at general rural and economic development. It may not be possible to separate or make a clear distinction between extension and non-extension activities. A commercialised agricultural extension system might therefore compromise rural and economic development. Examples of non-extension activities that are likely to suffer as a result include the mobilisation of farmers for self-help projects, organisation of farmer associations, and the organisation and distribution of drought relief. Also to be affected will be general community development activities, as well as the use of Agritex as an entry point by numerous arms of government, NGOs, and various other interest groups.

- v) *Economic costs of Cost Recovery:* Economic costs of cost recovery might be inhibiting. Collecting payment from farms is likely to be time consuming, difficult and expensive. The introduction of cost reduction measures might also necessitate structural changes within the extension agency, with very uncertain impacts on the system. Very few quantitative studies exist that document successful transition from public to private or commercialised extension.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

The current state of agricultural performance and income levels in smallholder areas makes it inappropriate to offer extension services on the basis of cost recovery. Cost recovery or commercialised extension services should be a long-term objective of Agritex. The current challenge is to increase agricultural productivity and incomes to levels that will make it feasible for farmers to pay for the extension services provided. However, Agritex should recover costs from NGOs that seek Agritex's assistance in providing services to farming communities. Agritex can levy charges for some specific activities, for example, providing training for NGOs, through recovering costs of transport. NGOs can also assume a greater role in agricultural extension, focusing on the areas where services have been withdrawn. Agritex also needs to carry out an in-depth analysis of the costs associated with supporting agro-service companies' commercial activities and charge them for these services.

According to Agritex (1999), extension activities most suited to private provision are those that are highly specialised and client-specific, or associated with the sale of physical inputs. This implies that incentives for the private financing and delivery of extension services are greater the more commercialised is the farming system. According to Umali and Schwartz (1994), it is also important that governments initiating a commercialisation plan

allow or provide an environment that encourages rapid growth in the private agricultural extension sector.

Given individual governments' equity goals and roles in rural development, a compensatory use of contract and grant funds might also be needed to provide a minimum level of service in disadvantaged areas. Alternatively, discounts or subsidies may be used to encourage emerging and low-income farmers to engage in-group use of services, which is less expensive than individual targeted services. Farmers can also offer in-kind contributions, in the form of materials, land, labour, housing, and transport, to extension agents (Geran, 1994).

Farmer co-operatives and commodity boards, could also be used to provide "free" or low-cost services to farmer groups. Legislation can be ratified to allow commodity groups to levy members, where producer levies are used to support research projects and provide technology dissemination services to the members at no additional charge (Sandrey and Scobie, 1990). Universities can also take a more active role in organising and sponsoring free or minimum cost conferences for the dissemination of new agricultural technologies.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper has described the current agricultural extension system and critically analyzed the likely implications of the commercialisation of the system within the context of a developing country such as Zimbabwe. Concludingly, from a strict economic point of view, commercialisation of agricultural extension seems to be the only way forward. However, from a social and equity point of view, the privatisation of extension services is likely to do more harm than good. This is particularly so given that agriculture is a major employer both directly (as farmers, and workers on farms) and indirectly (through firms that provide services and utilise agricultural products as raw materials), while agricultural extension is a key factor in the performance and development of individual countries' agricultural sectors.

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