

A departure from the past? Extension workers and participatory rural development: the case of Botswana

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This article addresses the question of whether extension workers can change their attitudes and practices in order to promote participatory rural development by considering the case of Botswana. It discusses the emergent participatory extension paradigm which uses techniques such as participatory rural appraisal (PRA). It describes the new community-based strategy for rural development in Botswana which includes the expectation that the extension services can be re-orientated to facilitate increased community participation. Evidence is presented from research in 1995–96 which evaluated a pilot project involving PRAs undertaken by extension workers in four districts. The project sought to find out systematically whether PRA could enhance the ability of the extension services to undertake participatory rural development. The findings suggest that extension workers can develop through training the attitudinal predisposition necessary for adopting a more participatory approach to extension practice. However, there are institutional and contextual constraints which present obstacles to implementing participatory rural development. It is therefore not certain that the proposal to expand the use of PRA on a national scale will lead to the anticipated reorientation of the extension services.

Introduction

Current development thinking and practice in the South is dominated on the right by the neo-liberalism associated with the World Bank/IMF and on the left by the populism associated with many proponents of non-governmental organizations. The two perspectives converge in their advocacy of a reduced role for the state in rural development and an enhanced role for community-based organizations. Thus from varying ideological positions the concept of people's participation in rural development has gathered significance for governments, non-governmental organizations and aid agencies since the mid-1980s. Participatory rural development is now a major theme of contemporary development strategies. Its advocates envisage decentralization by the state and assume, on the one hand, the capability of rural people to articulate their own priorities and organize around them, and on the other, the possibility of a change in the attitudes and practices of government officers in the rural areas so that they become partners and facilitators in the development process.

Botswana, like other countries in the South over the past decade, has been part of this trend. For the Government, the Rural Development Co-ordination Division (RDCD) of the Ministry of Finance and Development Planning has taken a leading role in promoting the idea of popular participation. For example, in 1985 it held a workshop on *The Theory and Practice of People's Participation in Rural Development* (Tsiane and Youngman 1986) which sought to identify the constraints on effective participation and suggest solutions. More recently, since 1994, it has promoted participatory methods

such as participatory rural appraisal. The non-governmental organization (NGO) sector has grown rapidly since the mid-1980s and local NGOs such as the Forum on Sustainable Agriculture and Co-operation for Research, Development and Education have provided support to community-based organizations. Similarly, aid agencies like USAID, the African Development Foundation and UNICEF have funded participatory development approaches and projects aimed at community empowerment. This trend was given significant momentum in 1997 when the Rural Development Council, the Government's high-level inter-ministerial committee responsible for formulating and monitoring rural development policy, approved a document from the RDCD entitled *Community Based Strategy for Rural Development* (Ministry of Finance and Development Planning 1997).

The strategy aims to increase rural incomes and employment and reduce rural poverty. It argues that strengthening the rural economy requires that communities become more involved in the planning and implementation of their own development. It therefore proposes that community participation should be made central to rural development activities. The strategy document recognizes that for the approach to succeed considerable changes will be required:

For this to represent a departure from the past, Government has to significantly increase the discretion afforded to communities through their leadership structures, re-orient the extension and other services towards facilitating communities' development activities, and promote the role of NGOs in assisting communities. (Ministry of Finance and Development Planning 1997: vi)

In this article we consider the implications of this participatory rural development strategy for government extension services and examine the possibilities of the extension workers making the required departure from past practice.

Extension practice and participatory rural development

Government extension services are a form of adult and continuing education which originated in the USA in the late nineteenth century. They were developed in the USA to diffuse practical information on agriculture and home economics to rural families as part of the process of modernizing and commercializing the farming sector. The basic model which emerged was of the extension worker as a 'change agent' who sought to encourage farming households to adopt research-based innovations and new technologies and thus change their existing practices. This model of extension education was first disseminated to the countries of the South during the colonial era and it has expanded enormously since then. In the post-colonial period, extension services have been a significant area of public sector and aid agency investment in rural development. This is exemplified by the Training and Visit system of agricultural extension which was introduced with World Bank support in over 40 countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s (Benor 1987). The extension concept has also been applied to rural sectors other than agriculture, such as health and off-farm economic activities, and extension has been perceived as having a crucial role in promoting community development, improving living conditions and alleviating poverty.

However, the conventional extension approach of information diffusion and technology transfer has often been less effective than expected. It has been increasingly

criticized for being top-down and for failing to engage rural people in the analysis and solution of their economic and social problems. As a result, the people served fail to adopt the technologies being suggested by extension workers. The reasons for ineffective extension include the inadequate training of staff, low levels of community involvement in programme planning and the negative attitudes of extension workers to rural communities (Eburn-Cole 1992). It is therefore argued that extension workers should establish a mutual relationship with communities if they are to facilitate change in the rural areas. In Africa, a recent study has concluded that given an opportunity to participate in their own development, communities can work very effectively with non-governmental organizations where extension workers provide support rather than take over the leadership of projects (Jommo 1995). Participatory extension approaches are thought to have greater potential for addressing the endemic problems of rural development, namely poverty, unequal distribution of income and lack of employment opportunities.

Since the early 1980s an alternative paradigm of extension practice has emerged based on approaches and methods which stress the participation and priorities of rural people (Chambers *et al.* 1987). Some of the key components of this people-centred paradigm are:

- recognition of the validity and usefulness of indigenous knowledge and practices;
- putting first the problems, analysis and priorities of rural people;
- two-way communication, with communities and extension workers as partners;
- facilitation of an open learning process;
- encouragement of participation based on local initiatives and community organizations.

A variety of participatory methods have been developed which can enable extension workers to put this approach into practice. These include participatory rural appraisal, which embodies a number of special information collection and ranking techniques that enable communities to gather and analyse information and to prioritize actions that address identified problems (Chambers 1997).

This new extension paradigm is an important part of conceptions of participatory rural development. However, it is recognized that a key obstacle to achieving a paradigm change is the attitudes and practices of the extension workers themselves. Their own professionalism is a problem as they have been socialized and trained in conventional extension approaches and methods (Chambers 1987: 181). Thus an important issue to consider in the context of proposals to introduce participatory rural development is the adoption of new values, behaviours and methods by extension workers.

Rural development in Botswana

Botswana became independent from Britain in 1966 but it was not until 1973 that the Government enunciated a comprehensive rural development policy in the *National Policy for Rural Development* (Republic of Botswana 1973). The policy aimed to use revenues from the mineral sector as the basis for modernizing agricultural production, developing rural employment, and providing infrastructure and social services in the

rural areas. The rapid growth of diamond exports during the 1970s enabled a sustained construction programme (especially of schools, health facilities, water supplies and roads) and an expansion of government services, such as the extension services. A system of district-level planning and coordination undertaken by the District Development Committees and District Councils was also established during the 1970s. From 1976, regular District Development Plans were produced, covering all sectors of rural development for a six-year period. The district planning process included consultation with rural dwellers through meetings in the traditional village meeting place (*kgotla*) and through conferences with representatives of Village Development Committees from throughout the district.

By the end of the 1970s, it came to be recognized that the focus on infrastructure and services had led to a neglect of the productive sector and *National Development Plan V 1979–1985* (Republic of Botswana 1979) included a new emphasis on employment creation in the rural areas. A number of government packages to support productive activities were introduced in the early 1980s, such as the Arable Lands Development Programme and the Financial Assistance Policy to support business projects. However, the severe drought from 1981 to 1987 meant that the Government's rural development activities during the 1980s focused largely on drought relief and drought recovery measures. But there was stagnation in the rural economy and the drought relief measures were top-down in approach and tended to stifle grassroots participation in rural development (Datta 1995). Widespread poverty continued in the 1990s, with 47% of the population living below the poverty datum line in 1993–94 (Botswana Institute for Development Policy Analysis 1997).

Critics of the Government's rural development policies and programmes (such as White *et al.* 1993, Datta 1995) argue that despite achievements in the provision of infrastructure and services, the rural areas are characterized by inequality and poverty, a lack of income-generating opportunities, insufficient decentralization of planning to the districts, poorly coordinated and ineffective extension services, community dependence on government programmes and a low level of participation in the development process. In particular, the Government's approach has been criticized for denying the rural people the chance to express their perceptions of poverty and their perspectives on how it could be alleviated. In response to such criticisms, the Government's new *Community Based Strategy for Rural Development* is intended to address these problems. It aims to:

...introduce a more effective and sustainable approach to rural development by substantially increasing the role of community participation and community leadership structures in identifying their own economic needs and aspirations and formulating and implementing their own action plans to address these. This will require a significant shift of responsibility and control over rural development activities from central and district level to community level. It will also require a change in the composition and type of development activities in order to concentrate on those activities capable of improving incomes and employment and reducing poverty. (Ministry of Finance and Development Planning 1997: v)

The strategy provides a policy framework for a new approach to the persistent problems of rural development and identifies a re-orientation of the extension services as an important element for its successful implementation.

Extension services in Botswana

The extension services provide a network of government officers spread throughout the rural areas. Extension workers provide information and skills, mobilize communities to form committees and associations, give access to various government financial schemes for economic and social development projects, and organize consultation for district planning. They are attached both to central government ministries (for example, the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Commerce and Industry) and to departments of District Councils (for example, the Department of Health and the Department of Social and Community Development). Their activities cover all rural development sectors, including agriculture, home economics, small business, co-operatives, literacy, health and nutrition, community development, and wildlife and natural resource management. Some departments have extension workers at the village level, such as agricultural demonstrators, family welfare educators, literacy assistants and community development assistants. Other departments only have extension workers at district headquarters or in larger settlements, such as wildlife officers and industrial officers.

The responsibility for coordinating and monitoring the extension services of both central and local government lies with the Rural Development Co-ordination Division (RDCD) of the Ministry of Finance and Development Planning. There is a three-tier system of extension coordination. At the national level, there is the Rural Extension Co-ordination Committee, a sub-committee of the Rural Development Council for which RDCD provides the Chair and Secretary. It has 17 members who include the heads of all central government extension departments and a senior official of the Ministry of Local Government and Lands to provide a link to the District Councils. At the district level, there is the District Extension Team (DET), a sub-committee of the District Development Committee chaired by the District Officer (Development). Its membership includes all the heads of District Council extension departments and the district-level heads of central government extension departments. There are 19 DETs nationwide. At the village level there is the Village Extension Team which brings together the various government officers working in the villages.

Whilst the extension services are credited with a number of achievements over the years, for example in primary health care, their performance has also attracted substantial criticism. This criticism has stressed the problem of the top-down approach to extension, with its emphasis on 'extension messages' and 'packages', and the ineffectiveness of the extension services with respect to the goal of enhancing people's participation in rural development. Pearce (1991: 57), for example, emphasized the problem of poor coordination and lack of responsiveness to community needs:

... the most widely accepted constraint to effective extension seems to be the large number of extension agents and consequent problems of effective co-ordination and timely and well targeted service delivery. Although extension workers and supervisors have highlighted a number of problems regarding conditions of service, extension consumers and clients see the main constraint as inadequate coverage of all *their* needs.

The significance of these problems for the Government's new community-based approach was recognized in the policy document that proposed the strategy:

... extension services [must] adjust to meet the needs of the community, as opposed to the present tendency of providing centrally-designed packages of services which

are often not sufficiently relevant to communities. (Ministry of Finance and Development Planning 1997: 29)

The components of the strategy therefore included retraining of extension workers, refocusing of extension support and re-orientation of coordination structures. The question that arises is whether the necessary changes to the extension services for the promotion of participatory rural development can be achieved. To address this question we consider the evidence provided by a pilot project involving extension workers in the use of participatory rural appraisal (PRA).

The PRA pilot project, 1995–96

During 1993 and 1994 a number of initiatives were taken by various government departments, NGOs and aid agencies to introduce participatory methods, particularly participatory rural appraisal. The reports of these activities undertaken in different parts of the country and in different organizational contexts suggested that PRA had the potential to improve existing extension approaches and consultation procedures (see for example, Botswana Orientation Centre 1994). It was against this background that the Rural Extension Co-ordinating Committee (RECC) decided at the end of 1994 to sponsor a pilot project that would find out more systematically whether PRA could enhance the ability of the extension services to promote a more participatory approach to rural development.

The pilot project took place during 1995 and 1996 and involved four different District Extension Teams (DETs). The district-level extension workers were seen to be of great strategic importance for the widespread adoption of PRA as they constitute the middle-management level of the extension services. Each DET was trained in the use of PRA and undertook one PRA in a village in its district. The four villages were chosen to provide variety in terms of geographical location and social composition and they ranged in population size from 400 to 2250. The four PRAs were monitored and evaluated by a research team from the Departments of Adult Education and Social Work of the University of Botswana. The research involved individual and group interviews with villagers and government officers, self-administered questionnaires by extension workers, observations of the PRA process, and follow-up visits to the DETs and villages to assess impact. The research was designed to produce empirical information on the applicability and compatibility of PRA with Botswana's system of rural extension, consultation and planning. It was envisaged that empirically based recommendations would enable the RECC to decide whether PRA should be promoted on a larger scale as an integral part of extension practice. The findings and recommendations of the research team were presented in a report entitled *PRA: Contract and Commitment for Village Development* (Prinsen *et al.* 1996).

Research findings on extension workers' attitudes

One dimension of the research undertaken during the PRA pilot project was an analysis of the attitudes of the district-level extension workers involved. The 47 District Extension Team members who were involved in implementing the four PRAs during the project were given a questionnaire to fill in privately at four different points in time. They were asked to reply to the same questions *before* the PRA, *during* the PRA,

immediately after the PRA and several months after the PRA. The questionnaires thus gathered information on the attitudes of extension workers to PRA and registered changes that took place over time as a result of the experience of involvement with PRA. A total of 66 District Extension Team members (including some who had not participated in the PRAs) from the four districts involved also took part in a group interview four to seven months after the PRA and this provided further attitudinal information. The findings reported by the research team (Prinsen *et al.* 1996) provide insights into the views of a sample of district-level extension workers on aspects of participatory rural development. Selected research findings of most relevance to the article are presented below.

Community capacity to identify and solve problems

A basic assumption of participatory rural development is that government officers in the rural areas believe in the capacity of communities to identify and solve the problems that confront them. This presupposes a change to the top-down approach that government officers know best what is needed and what should be done. Therefore an important research finding was that the longer DET members spent in the PRA process in the village, the larger the proportion (rising to 89 %) who believed that villagers do indeed know their problems. However, another finding was that after the PRA 44 % of the district-level extension workers were doubtful whether villagers possessed the skills to solve their communities' problems. Also, after the PRA 43 % of DET members thought that village-based organizations lacked the capacity to carry out the agreed Community Action Plans. Furthermore, the experience of the PRA process increased their belief that divisions in the village hamper villagers' capacity to work together, so that after the PRA 61 % (from 43 % before) were of the opinion that villagers are too divided amongst themselves to work jointly as a community. It can be concluded that, after the experience of implementing a PRA, district-level extension workers came to value villagers' knowledge more highly but almost half doubted the capacity of communities to solve problems.

Bottom-up planning

The concept of participatory rural development embodies the idea that communities should produce their own plans for addressing their problems. Thus development planning should be based on meeting the needs and priorities identified at the village level. In the pilot project, the PRA methodology focused on facilitating communities to articulate actions to address their problems through the formulation of a Community Action Plan (CAP) which set priorities and identified those responsible for implementation.

The District Extension Team is responsible for organizing village consultations in the existing planning process that leads to the District Development Plans. Therefore DET members are in a good position to assess the usefulness of PRA for district-level planning. The research revealed that following the PRA 83 % of DET members thought PRA to be a very useful planning tool. They felt that the village development plan (CAP) that emerges from a PRA is better than the outcomes of existing consultation tools such as village meetings (*dikgotla*) and district development conferences. Three of

the DETs involved in the pilot project felt that the CAPs produced by the PRA process would be implementable because of the active involvement of the villagers, 'unlike other plans which are outsiders' impositions' (Prinsen *et al.* 1996: 13–14). However, all of the DETs noted the problem of inflexibility in district-level budgets that would make the funding of CAP projects very difficult if they were outside existing allocations set in the District Development Plan. They also indicated that there is no specific officer at district level with responsibility for the follow-up of CAPs and this diminishes the potential for implementation. It is concluded that the experience of involvement in PRA generated positive attitudes amongst district-level extension workers to its potential for bottom-up planning. But they also felt that there are institutional constraints in the existing system which obstruct bottom-up planning.

PRA and extension practice

The practice of participatory rural development requires that government officers such as extension workers establish a new kind of relationship with rural people and change their approaches to include participatory methods, such as PRA. The change in approach and the use of different methods have implications for current extension practice. The pilot project research sought the views of the district-level extension workers on whether PRA could be integrated into regular extension practice.

After the PRA, 65 % of the DET members agreed with the statement 'Government programmes disable villagers by taking responsibility for their lives' (Prinsen *et al.* 1996: 20). They therefore showed an attitudinal predisposition to change the current dependency relationship between extension workers and villagers to one of partnership. Involvement in the PRA also led an increased proportion (59 %) to agree with the view that PRA would definitely improve their regular extension activities. 85 % felt that their supervisors would support their involvement in PRAs undertaken by DETs, even though this presupposed multi-sectoral activity rather than departmental-specific programmes. Although the respondents were divided over whether PRA was too time-consuming, 67 % thought that time invested in PRA could reduce their workload in other fields. It was clear that as DET members learnt more about PRA, their willingness to incorporate PRA into their busy schedules increased. Overall, the research revealed that the majority of DET members came to value PRA more highly than existing approaches because, among other things, they recognized it offered better opportunities for less powerful villagers to participate, it generated better quality information on village situations and it led to improved inter-departmental cooperation. It can be concluded that a significant proportion of district-level extension workers see problems in their current approaches. They see the benefits of PRA and are willing to improve their work by incorporating it into everyday extension practice.

Training for change

If the re-orientation of government officers necessary for participatory rural development is to be achieved, then staff such as extension workers have to acquire new knowledge, skills and attitudes in order to change their way of doing things. This means that training has an important role, especially in-service training for serving officers. The pilot project involved a two-week training period for the members of the four

DETs. The training consisted of three and a half days of classroom preparation and eight days of experience in facilitating an actual PRA in a village in their own district. The research team observed that although the quality of classroom training left room for improvement, the field experience enabled the extension workers to build on their own experience and learn new competences in practice. Thus being put in the role of an active facilitator helped many of the DET members to develop the art of listening to villagers, though some retained the old habit of behaving as an expert and stifled open discussion and villagers' contributions.

The research team concluded that a standardized training programme on PRA for DET members should retain a combination of classroom and practical training. When asked to consider PRA training in relation to their workload, about two-thirds of DET members said they could manage to participate for 10 days in a PRA training course, though such training would have to compete with other training opportunities that they have (in the six months preceding the pilot project, one-quarter of the respondents had been to four or more training events). Training is necessary for change and it can be concluded that a standard approach to training could be developed which would be acceptable to extension workers and which would contribute to their re-orientation.

Implications of the findings

The research findings related to the attitudes of district-level extension workers indicate that experiential learning through involvement in participatory methods had an influence on extension workers. A majority of the respondents displayed a critical attitude towards existing practice and thus showed a readiness to adopt new approaches. The experience of implementing a PRA exercise produced positive attitudes to a number of the key components of the new extension paradigm. For example:

- a high proportion of respondents recognized the validity of villagers' knowledge about their own problems;
- a high proportion thought PRA was a useful method that enabled villagers to articulate their own priorities;
- a majority thought PRA was an improvement on existing approaches because it encouraged a greater degree of participation.

On the other hand, a degree of doubt remained in the minds of many respondents as to whether communities would be able to take the increased role that participatory approaches require. Nevertheless, a majority of respondents felt it would be worthwhile and feasible to incorporate a participatory method like PRA into their work.

Overall, the research findings suggest that extension workers can develop through training the attitudinal predisposition necessary for adopting a more participatory approach to extension practice. However, the success of the Government's new participatory rural development strategy will not only depend on a change in the attitudes and behaviour of the extension workers. Two other crucial determinants will affect the new strategy. First, there are the institutional factors related to whether the necessary decentralization of the government bureaucracy can be achieved and whether civil society can be strengthened to play a new role. The past record on decentralization is not propitious (see for example White *et al.* 1993) and the promotion of community-based organizations is still at an incipient stage with few examples of success. Second, there are the contextual factors related to Botswana's political

economy. Researchers such as Good (1996a, 1996b) and Molomo (1989) have argued that the political regime is one of 'authoritarian liberalism' and 'bureaucratic domination' in which popular participation is restricted and consultation is essentially symbolic. Furthermore, it is evident that the potential for participation by all members of the community is limited by the deep divisions of class, gender and ethnicity that characterize Botswana's rural society. These institutional and contextual constraints suggest that even when extension workers are ready to adopt new approaches they may have difficulties in implementing participation in practice.

Conclusion

The overall conclusion of the research report was that the pilot project had demonstrated that it was appropriate and feasible to incorporate PRA more widely into extension practices and village planning. The report was presented to the Rural Development Council in 1997 and its recommendations for the integration of PRA into extension activities and consultation procedures were accepted. In particular it was agreed to establish an inter-ministerial committee responsible to the Rural Extension Co-ordinating Committee to train systematically all District Extension Teams in PRA over the next five years so that they would use PRA more extensively, particularly in the consultations on the next District Development Plan. The extensive use of PRA was endorsed particularly as it seemed to provide the techniques necessary for operationalizing the new community-based strategy for rural development. Thus it is expected that scaling up the use of PRA to become a nationwide component of extension activities will contribute to the necessary re-orientation of the extension services. Whether this expectation will be met and extension workers will in practice make a departure from the past, only the future will tell.

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