

Decentralization of agricultural extension: New way to improve rural development in Third World

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Abstract: The evolution of public agricultural extension arrived at a worldwide turning point in the 1980s, one that represented the end of a major phase in the growth of publicly funded extension in both the developed and developing world. Agricultural extension increasingly has become defined as one or other of (apparently) differentiated activities of technology transfer or rural development. Agricultural extension is a non-formal type of education that provides advisory services by the use of educational approach in acquiring knowledge and skills to deal with the growing needs of global world. Diverse agricultural extension funding and delivery arrangements have been undertaken since the mid-1980s by governments worldwide in the name of "privatization." When agricultural extension is discussed, privatization is used in the broadest sense – of introducing or increasing private sector participation, which does not necessarily imply a transfer of designated state-owned assets to the private sector. In fact, various cost-recovery, commercialization, and other so-called privatization alternatives have been adopted to improve agricultural extension.

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Introduction:

Un-fortunately in developing as well as low income countries agricultural extension has failed in diffusing new technology to its ultimate users (Government of Malawi, 2000) and further deterioration witnessed with the passage of time (Eicher, 2001). The failure of agricultural extension services for last decades is under constant pressure to be responsive to ever-growing challenges of food production.

Over the past two decades many countries have undertaken to decentralize government functions and transfer authority and responsibilities from central to intermediate and local governments, and often to communities and the private sector. Decentralization is potentially important to agricultural knowledge and information systems, but decentralization is not an end in itself, and successful decentralization strategies must address three challenges—establishing a national framework for decentralization, developing subsector approaches, and enhancing capacities of various participants for coproduction of decentralized goods and services. Agricultural extension services are under increasing pressure to become more effective, more responsive to clients, and less costly to government. Decentralization is an increasingly common aspect of extension reforms. Field extension advisory services are well suited to decentralized approaches, but a comprehensive extension system requires a range of

extension support services and programs, some of which (strategy formulation, training, monitoring and evaluation, specialized technical support) are often best carried out at the central level.

The prime challenges in the traditional public extension systems enlisted as outdated, top-down, paternalistic, inflexible, subject to bureaucratic inefficiencies that results less ability to cope with the dynamic demands of modern day agriculture (World Bank, 2002; Obaa et al., 2005). In some countries the change is occurring with its natural pace but in many developing countries these have been accelerated by structural adjustment reforms (Chapman & Tripp, 2003).

Still the performance of agriculture sector at the farm level remains significantly below the potential and limited due to the weak institutional formwork in disseminating agricultural technology to the farmers (Farooq, 2005). Research scientists evolving new methods and technologies to meet the challenges of new era and the farming community also has a potential and courage to adopt but the third component i.e. agricultural extension, which serves as a technology transfer vehicle and play a significant role in increasing the productivity, farm incomes and ensure food security has been very much weak since independence (Luqman et al., 2004; Farooq, 2005). The extension services in the country have not been able to achieve their goals effectively, because of a number of bottlenecks. These include weak research-

extension linkages, lack of adequate resources for on-farm demonstrations, poor mobility, inadequate research and training in extension methodology and lack of an effective system of continuing education for extension personnel at various levels (Sandhu, 1993). Among major field crops wheat, rice, cotton and sugarcane accounts for 90.4% of the value added in major crops and 37.1% of the value added in overall agriculture (Government of Pakistan, 2005). The low production of these crops depends upon a number of factors including ineffective and isolated agricultural extension system.

The Government of Pakistan is well aware of this fact therefore from the Day of Independence different extension and rural development programs at national level launch by her e.g. Village Agricultural and Industrial Development Programme (Village-AID), Basic Democracies System (BDS), Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) and Training and Visit System (T & V). Unfortunately all these programmes were abolished one after the other because of their conventional, top down nature and inherited less effective technology transfer model (Williamson, 2002; World Bank, 2003). The last efficient extension programme was (T & V) that become ineffective due to its rigidity, top down orientation, non-responsiveness to farmers' needs, much expensive, least effective in feed back communication with farmers and un-able to meet the challenges of changing circumstances. To overcome the weaknesses and shortcomings in (T & V) system Government introduced Decentralization of Agricultural Extension reforms with the name Devolution of Power Plan to up-lift the local people's economic status through pooling all the national sources and resources at grass root level. Devolution is the complete, permanent (SPDC, 2000) and advanced form of decentralization and also helps in strengthening the functions of and empowering with more authority to the elected representatives (FAO, 2001). With the promulgation of this new system, institutional reforms have been introduced almost in all the line departments including Agricultural Extension (Luqman et al., 2004). The new system of agricultural extension, works under the supervision of district Government in which each district is managing its agricultural extension activities, where the functions of all sister organizations such as Water Management, Fisheries, Livestock, Soil conservation, Forestry, etc; are put under single manager called as Executive District Officer of Agriculture (EDO) (World Bank, 2003). The administrative changes in the setup of agricultural extension department affect the working efficiency of Extension Field Staff (EFS) in their area of jurisdiction having both positive and negative impacts (Luqman et al., 2005), while on the

other hand Farooq (2005) conducted a research study in two districts of North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and observed the difficulties faced by the extension staff in post devolution framework. The major hurdles in creating difficulties for EFS in the research area were multifarious duties, double chain command and lack of administrative staff and burden of increased paper work.

Decentralization as transfer of authority and responsibility for government functions from central government to intermediate and local governments, and often to communities and the private sector has become widespread over the 1980s and 1990s. Countries with diverse systems and traditions of government have pursued decentralization initiatives for many reasons, including especially the failure of government to meet expectations under centralized approaches to economic management and service approaches to organizing public administration. Though not yet widely applied to agricultural research and extension, decentralization strategies are potentially important to these agricultural knowledge and information systems. Decentralization is frequently viewed from one of two different perspectives (Johnson, 2000).

1. The democratic view emphasizes the aspect of empowering local people to control and direct their own public programs; and

2. The administrative view emphasizes the efficiency gains resulting from improved administration and effectiveness of public programs due to local control. Decentralization is generally expected to: encourage local financing and ownership of programs, result in more efficient and equitable allocation of government resources, provide incentives for production and service delivery, ensure lower-cost service delivery, build local capacity, and respond more effectively to local needs. (Khan, 2002).

For rural programs, decentralization offers hope for correcting the urban bias that results from the geographic dispersion of rural people, the difficulties for them to organize to promote their interests, and the discrimination against agriculture inherent in many country policy frameworks. Decentralization of agricultural extension and research seeks to increase user participation in technology programs and make programs more accountable to users. (Eicher, 2001).

Enthusiasm for decentralization needs to be tempered with some caution. In small countries, decentralization may be unnecessary and in very large countries decentralization to the state or provincial level may still leave programs distant from user influence. Definitive evidence of the impact of decentralization is limited and not everyone benefits

from any reform. Furthermore, decentralization does little to improve intraregional disparities, may bring oppressive elites into power, and can lead to greater inequalities in allocation of government resources.

Thus, decentralization has the potential to increase access to and cost of services, but specific targeting mechanisms and strong central oversight are needed to avoid inequities in service access and quality. (Farooq, 2005).

Principles in Decentralization Reform:

Decentralization takes many forms with varied mixes of fiscal, administrative, and political decentralization. Privatization, deconcentration, and delegation initiatives can complement and reinforce an overall decentralization policy, but these do not constitute, and can in some cases work against, effective decentralization (FAO, 2001).

Four requirements for successful decentralization are:

- Providing local people with substantial real influence over the local political system and local developmental activities;
- Ensuring availability of financial resources adequate for decentralized institutions to accomplish their tasks;
- Ensuring adequate administrative capacity in local units to carry out their tasks; and
- Establishing reliable mechanisms for accountability of politicians and bureaucrats to local people.

Deconcentration is nearly always the first—and necessary—step in any process of decentralization. This puts staff from central administrations in closer contact with local people, problems, and conditions and provides a channel for local interaction with government. Unfortunately, decentralization reforms frequently stop at this point with central authorities retaining control over deconcentrated administrative structures (World Bank, 2003).

Administrative decentralization, represents a more fundamental reform that replaces existing centralized structures with a new administrative structure of local government. Transfer of power to decentralized offices increases local participation in decisionmaking and allows programs to be tailored to local needs.

Political decentralization, makes decentralized bureaucracies accountable to locally elected officials and officials accountable to the people. Elections, referenda, and local participatory decisionmaking arrangements give people direct control over government programs, but short of these formal political processes, a variety of mechanisms (reflecting “participation” more than

“decentralization”) can give people influence over government programs. These include: incorporating local representatives into governance and advisory boards, client surveys, polls, and program “report cards,” and rapid rural appraisal techniques (Luqman et al., 2005).

Fiscal decentralization, is often seen as a way to reduce central government budgets by off-loading tasks a central government can no longer finance. In practice, however, decentralization is likely to result in higher costs for central budgets. Fiscal decentralization may transfer authority for expending funds, raising taxes, or borrowing, but intergovernmental fiscal transfers (IGFTs or “grants”) are usually the key means of financing decentralized programs.

Concern over local administrative capacity frequently leads central governments to impose controls that are costly to administer and that restrict local flexibility in managing funds. Experience would indicate that local governments are generally capable of assuming substantial responsibility, and decentralized programs can provide different financing packages to communities with different levels of capacity (Williamson, 2002).

Many programs are best implemented through “coproduction” or partnerships between various actors—central government, local government, private sector, civil society, and the individual—each providing the good or service for which it has a comparative advantage. Coproduction requires clarity in division of labor and clear “contracts” between different partners. (Sandhu, 1993).

Privatization, delegation, and devolution strategies complement decentralization and, like decentralization, broaden the institutional base for administration and execution of technology programs; reduce the burden on central governments for provision of services (responsibilities in which they have been less than fully successful); and increase stakeholder participation and influence over programs. Advantages of these complementary strategies are that:

- Full privatization relieves government of responsibility for production of private goods and services with few externalities. Extension services for commercial crops grown by wealthier farmers, information on postharvest handling and processing technologies, and marketing of machinery or production inputs often fall in this category.
- Private provision of publicly financed services takes advantage of private providers’ greater efficiency and flexibility in executing programs. Government contracting of NGOs or private extension providers is a common example.

- Delegation and devolution maintains some government authority and financing, but gives implementing institutions operational flexibility and ability to specialize. Governments may delegate extension responsibilities to research institutes or devolve responsibility for commodity extension to a commodity group (Farooq, 2005).

Recognizing Multiple Extension Functions:

National agricultural extension systems (NAESs) must incorporate a range of extension activities that vary in suitability to decentralization. Field advisory services, as the traditional extension methodology, are compatible with decentralized program strategies and in some cases are suited to private service provision or complete privatization. Other services to support field extension agents and complement field advisory services are often better suited to centralized production. (Khan, 2002).

Functions best centralized are those that:

Support national strategies and financing mechanisms; involve economies of scale and scope; serve a number of administrative regions; or require greater technical input and networking than can be managed at the local level. Services needed in a comprehensive extension system include:

- Extension policy, strategy formulation, and planning (centralized);
- Training programs for extension agents (centralized or decentralized);
- Technical specialist support to extension agents (centralized);
- Production of extension publications, audiovisual materials, guidebooks, and other materials (generally centralized);
- Monitoring and evaluation to support program quality enhancement (needed at all management levels);
- Training programs for farmers (generally decentralized);
- Market information services (centralized);
- Encouragement for (and possibly some controls on) private sector extension (privatization with mixed centralized/decentralized controls);
- Mass media campaigns, including radio, television, agricultural magazines, newspapers, and letters (generally centralized, but may be decentralized or privatized); and
- Internet and/or telephone dissemination of information and fielding questions from farmers, agribusiness, or extension agents (centralized). (Farooq, 2005).

Decentralized Governance -Introducing Accountability:

Decentralizing extension by involving farmers and local government in governance of programs can improve program accountability, increase user ownership of programs, ensure relevance to local needs, improve planning and information flows, and strengthen user capabilities. Transferring program responsibilities to locally elected officials directly decentralizes program governance and accountability to local people. Perhaps equally important are alternate mechanisms that increase user participation and influence over program content and operations. Reforms that enhance farmer influence over program governance include: incorporating farmers into governance and oversight committees; adopting participatory extension approaches; involving farmers in identifying priorities, planning, and monitoring; working through farmer groups; and using participatory evaluation and feedback mechanisms for program evaluation. Decentralizing governance holds particular promise for making extension programs (and agents) accountable to users. Farmers know whether they are receiving valuable services and should have the power to demand good performance by their service providers. When farmers have authority to influence decisions on program funding, hiring and dismissing staff, and staff incentives, they are truly empowered to improve services. At a minimum, all extension programs should seek farmer feedback on the relevance, quality, and usefulness of extension services. (Chapman & Tripp, 2003).

A concern in decentralized extension systems is the degree to which governance mechanisms are representative of all farmers in an area. Women, small farmers, and ethnic or cultural minorities are often underrepresented in governance groups, but may be more in need of public services than those actually representing local interests. Disadvantages of farmer governance are the high up-front costs of participatory approaches, difficulties in ensuring true representation of participating groups, risk of aggravating conflicts or unduly raising expectations, and the possibility of program capture by elites (Farooq, 2005).

As the traditional view of extension as a function of government agencies gives way in the face of multiple service providers, an expanding agenda, and a better understanding of farmer information and innovation systems, decentralized governance of extension services should become both easier and more important.

Fiscal Decentralization of Extension Services:

Government inability to sustain financial support for large extension systems has been a motivation for the many reforms that attempt to

reduce public sector funding, introduce private financing, or eliminate government programs that compete with the private sector. Typically, these strategies tend to decentralize extension financing. Although an objective of many decentralization reforms has been to reduce government expenditures, local governments generally have limited resources and limited ability to raise funds. Central governments therefore must usually continue financing for extension services through intergovernmental financial transfers (IGFTs), and must also finance the considerable costs of reform and local capacity development. This increases total financing requirements for extension, at least over the short term. Over the longer term, decentralizing extension services might reduce government financing requirements by: (1) increasing efficiencies through better oversight and greater flexibility in funding decisions and (2) increasing cofinancing by being more responsive, and demonstrating greater benefits, to users. Cofinancing grants (IGFTs) to local governments or farmer groups are an important element of fiscal decentralization, but they present two significant problems: (Chapman & Tripp, 2003).

- Many local organizations lack capacity to plan, manage, and evaluate extension programs and lack the contacts and financial management capacity to procure needed services; and

- Resource-rich farmers are better able to cofinance services and capture program benefits, even if program objectives are to assist weaker elements of rural society. Still, many new initiatives are using subgrants of various types for local subprojects, and future program design can draw on this experience. Decentralization programs must address these two problems. Training and orientation, program promotion, and support services are critical to enable target clients and local organizations to take over extension responsibilities under new decentralized systems. Later, as programs are implemented, a strong monitoring and evaluation system is needed to provide management with information necessary to understand who is benefiting from the program and what real impact it is having (Farooq, 2005).

Conclusion:

Decentralize extension services where possible, with emphasis on giving users control over program planning, implementation, and evaluation.

- Provide for adequate centralized support systems for decentralized extension services, especially support for training, subject matter specialists, and production of extension materials.

- Adapt strategies to local institutional environments to accommodate country legal

frameworks, political traditions, administrative structures, and social and agroecological conditions. Extension strategies can emphasize decentralization when there is already a strong political decentralization in the country, but should proceed cautiously when decentralization is not yet well established.

- Determine on a case-by-case basis whether decentralized services should be managed by local governments, community/producer organizations, or local governments in conjunction with producer/community organizations.

- Provide clear division of responsibilities between the different levels of government and other program participants.

- Develop procedures for policy formulation and priority setting in mixed systems to reconcile central government financing and policy objectives (poverty alleviation, food security, and environmental conservation) with local peoples' priorities that emerge from the decentralized program governance.

- Provide for needed fiscal transfers from central government to decentralized implementing agencies to finance decentralized extension services, recognizing that over the short term decentralization rarely reduces requirements for central government financing.

- Structure fiscal transfers to give users maximum influence over programs and to promote institutional pluralism in service provision. This empowers users and develops capacities in a range of public and private providers, such that the most competent institutions are able to provide the services.

- Provide for extensive planning, promotion of the rationale and principles behind reforms, and training in new operational procedures before launching decentralization reforms.

- Provide for needed investments in development of local capacity (local governments, executing agencies, community or producer groups), as such implementation capacity is critical to success of decentralization reforms.

- Establish effective systems to monitor and evaluate decentralized programs, and ensure that the data are available at all appropriate levels. Central monitoring should be sensitive to equity issues and the possibility of local elites capture of programs, thus excluding services to the poor or women.

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