

## **CULTURE AS A RESOURCE FOR DEVELOPMENT: SOME CHALLENGES FOR EXTENSION MANAGEMENT**

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### **RESUMÉ**

*Any consideration of the science of management in an African context has inevitably to focus on South Africa because it is here that one encounters the heterogeneity of mindsets, forged in the interface of Europe, Asia and Africa: First and Third world. Westernisation is implicitly implied as a goal to promote agricultural production.*

*This paper highlights some of the characteristics and problems of the old approach to culture development and emphasises the need for South African extension services to think in a new paradigm to be able to mobilise all knowledge systems in search of sustainable agriculture development.*

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Southern Africa is undergoing rapid, if not traumatic, changes. Africa needs changes, which other nations took centuries to achieve; yet the continent's population wants it within twenty-four hours. The gap between reality and expectations is a wide one; so, too, is the gap between institutional performance and needs. Extension managers are often called upon to synthesise a set of polarities such as needs versus fulfilment, and commercialisation versus small-scale operations. The list is indeed endless. Managers need to abandon the "car wash" and "mirror" mentalities, and the need is not only for pragmatism but also to evolve management practices and principles based on the African, or southern, cultural realities.

Culture reflects peoples' perception of reality of their worldview. "*Culture is the sum total of the original solutions that a group of human beings invent to adapt to their natural and social environment*" according to Verhelst (1990). Given the context, culture is crucial in development and especially agricultural development, because it conveys knowledge and important information in a society, which the society then applies to adapt its environment. Therefore development is context bound.

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The value of culture as a resource for development often does not receive the attention it deserves. There are many reasons for this, but probably the most important one is that development was often equated with westernisation and therefore became a form of cultural imperialism in which other cultures and knowledge systems were regarded as inferior.

The result of this state of affairs is that lots of valuable indigenous knowledge from indigenous cultures may be lost forever during the process of acculturation.

A number of countries in the so called First World are battling with problems to sustain social and environmental systems and it also becomes clear that there are not sufficient resources to promote the western development model of maximum industrialisation. The same crisis touches the core of extension management, since westernisation is also implied in extension. Indigenous culture is often regarded as a stumbling block for development and where this is not the case the methodology to deal with culture as a resource is seldom in place. South Africa is a human conglomeration (rainbow nation) whose cultural roots is diverged, and is needed to be purposefully connected to our respective managerial attitudes and behaviour.

## **2. CULTURE A STUMBLING BLOCK FOR DEVELOPMENT?**

Agriculture was generally identified to make a major contribution to the over-all development because the resources needed are available at relatively low opportunity cost (Mellor, 1996). Institutions such as the World Bank were established during the late 1940's in an attempt to promote rural development in the poor regions of the world. It seems as if the fear of another American recession was the stimulus for initiatives of this nature since Americans were trying vigorously to find additional markets for their products (Wood, 1986). This was an important stimulus for the cold war.

The development approaches have changed fundamentally over the past half-century. Broadly speaking, the fifties and sixties were characterised by the belief in trickle down development and technology transfer; the seventies and early eighties by equity basic needs considerations; and the later eighties and nineties by participatory, people driven development.

The Atlantic Charter, which was signed in the mid 1940's, stressed the promotion of human rights. This development provided an important impetus for the start of the development debate and millions of dollars were spent in an attempt to uplift the poor regions of the World. The Green Revolution followed during the 1960's with the model of Rostow, which was a classical example of an initiative

of this nature. Agricultural advisors from the United States in particular were geared towards the transfer of western skills, models and technology to poor low developed countries in an attempt to eradicate poverty in these regions. These attempts were strongly based on “leading sectors “. Each period in history was characterised by the dominance of a certain sector (Stevens & Jabara, 1988).

The assumption was made that conditions in the poor South are relatively similar compared to those in Europe (North) and that a plan of action could be planned in advance. This proved to be a fallacy. In the same vein the indigenous culture of the people were regarded as a stumbling block for development. It was generally believed that indigenous institutions should be replaced by modern western ones that would gradually create the right conditions for a market economy and for westernisation as a whole (Fair, 1982).

Two criticisms often heard against this approach are that first, saving and investing is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for accelerating growth (Torado, 1977). The comparison with the Marshall plan to rebuild Europe after the World war was not successful. Massive injection of capital enhanced a quick revival and the fast growing of economy, but most of the less developed countries of today are building and not rebuilding their economy.

The second critique is that less developed countries are parts of a highly integrated and complex international system. Development is more than removing obstacles and injecting capital. Many theorists started to question these large-scale intervention (mainly agriculture and institution building) efforts since it was not geared to address the basic needs of the people concerned and it was seldom their choice (Schumacher, 1973). According to Tapson (1987), even where satisfactory economic growth had occurred, the trickle down theory failed to deliver. Growth was accompanied by polarisation of income levels between the rich and the poor.

As a result the issue of equity was granted an importance it had not previously enjoyed, and the principle of redistribution was floated. This paved the way for the rise of the basic needs approach. In contrast to early sectoral approaches to promote agricultural production, which had a strong macro focus, basic needs as an approach attempted to address development issues at grass roots by emphasising the importance of opinions of the intended beneficiaries in defining what real development is. It was accepted that these beneficiaries have a crucial role to play in the process of their own development. Unfortunately, these were approached as universal development indicators, which clearly had an ethnocentric bias. However, basic needs were the start of a movement away from

macro development approaches. In the process it was virtually unavoidable to address culture in development especially in the debate on intermediate and appropriate technology. Technology transfer and economic growth principles were no longer seen as part of a top-down, prescriptive form of development. The basic need concept was, where adopted, most commonly incorporated into a set of actions that collectively became known as the integrated rural development approach. Integrated Rural Development constituted a significant node in the evolution of development thinking based as it is on a rational analysis of past failures and present realities in the rural areas (Uphoff, 2000).

The basic need theory was far too vague since it left space for many diverse interpretations, however it formed an important building block in the evolution of development thought. A lot was done in the process to move away from the idea to view culture as a stumbling block for development. However, it has to be acknowledged that western ethnocentrism and positivism was firmly embedded in this approach.

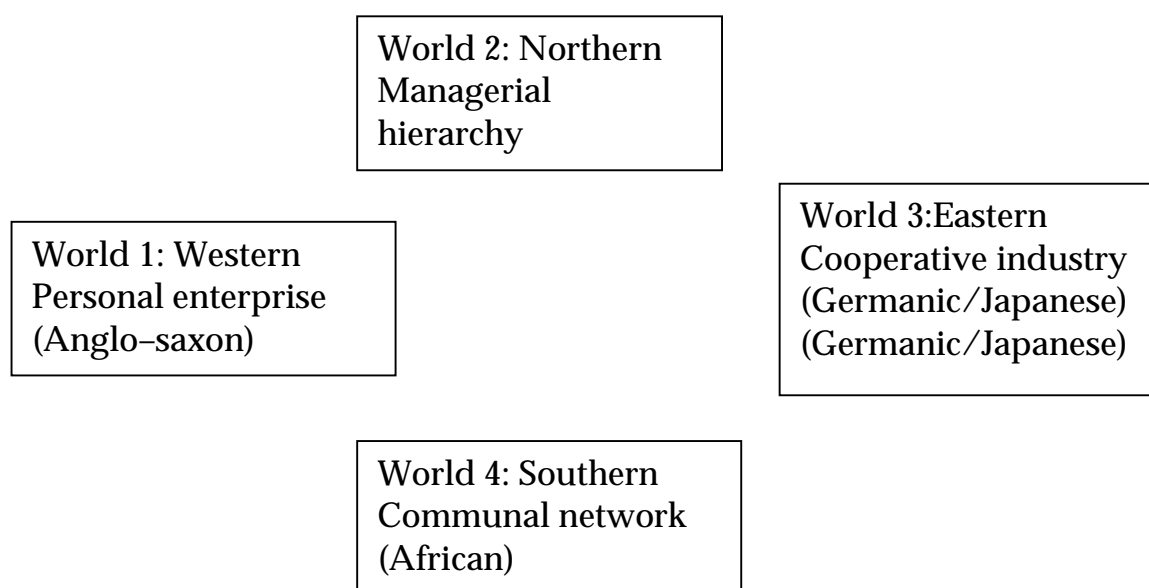
Towards the late seventies the basic needs approach began to fade and almost everything in development was linked to participatory development (Oakley, 1991). Although participatory development was more of a slogan than a specific theory it paved the way for the development of various important practice theories such as Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). These practice theories stimulated the debate on culture in development tremendously. In the debate on PRA local and often illiterate farmers proved beyond doubt that their indigenous knowledge can go a long way towards explaining what is happening in agriculture development in their region.

Sustaining culture in a participatory way became an important element of the debate on sustainable development (Lélé, 1991). It was soon realised that it is futile to preserve culture in a techno centric way. In many cases nature has evolved closely with social systems and these evolutionary links are important to keep both nature and social systems in tact. Culture and nature are therefore important factors in the debate on extension management. However the way in which this issue should be approached in practice has not received the attention it deserves.

### **3. HUMAN CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH PARTICIPATION**

Agricultural extension in South Africa has not emerged in a vacuum. It has indeed evolved out of one particular cultural heritage and perhaps duly ignored the others. Extension has followed the same trend of the SA business enterprise, in that it has drawn strongly on its competitive and personalised (world 1) and

weakly on its co-ordinated and managerial (world 2) heritage, while ignoring its co-operative (world 3) and communal (world 4) ones.



**Figure 1: Southern African Business sphere (Lessem, 1993)**

Eicher (1991) has observed that there is a conspiracy of error in that advanced industrialized countries carry with them the arrogance that their blue print, optimal model should be carried to developing countries. For example, extension systems developed in the United States have been transferred with little success to Latin American countries. This transfer of institutional innovations is grounded on the thinking that institutions developed for economic, social and political environment of the Western countries are appropriate for Africa settings. What we need is to develop human capability and discover human talent in Africa by developing institutions or extension services to support human capital development through education, training and human development.

World wide, most of the extension services are underpinned by the theory and widespread tenet that:

- The stimulus for change in farming communities must come from outside
- The impetus takes the form of generated knowledge and technologies
- Traditional ways of cultivation will be “modernised”
- Mission of extension is to bring “outside knowledge”

- Attitudes and practices which may be dissonant with this new knowledge will be broken down
- Assumes we can know enough in advance to design a course of action in detail, one that needs only to be implemented.
- It also assumes that circumstances will not differ significantly from the model
- Farmers will be persuaded to adopt new practices

Obviously this approach is anti-participatory, and apart from some consultation with farmers without the gaining of understanding and voluntary cooperation, farmers are regarded as mechanisms by which objectives and targets can be achieved (Oakley, 1991).

#### **4. THE DIFFERENT VIEWS ON PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT**

The perception of participation is often very narrow and conventional development projects frequently rely upon benefits as the basic instrument of any participation that occurs. Pretty & Scoones (1995) say that there is a tendency for those who use the term participation to adopt a moral high ground, implying that any form of participation is good. There are various and often very diverse views on participatory development. However for the purposes of this discussion the two most important extreme views on the continuum will be addressed briefly.

Firstly, there are many supporters of participatory development that equates participation with client involvement in a particular initiative. The change agent (which may be an extension officer) may be closely involved with needs identification. In this case the change agent is regarded as the professional and his or her opinion is supposed to carry a lot of weight. According to this view farmers and extensionist are partners in a business enterprise. In cases of this nature they rely heavily on the specialist opinion of the extension officer. This blue print approach places a heavy burden on extension services and may often lead to conflict between the extensionist and the farmers. Especially when advice did not have the desired effect. This approach is risky especially were all the stakeholders are locked in a continuous gamble with nature.

The second approach to participation equates participation with control. In this case the farmers are in control of the initiative from the very start. There is a drastic change in the power relationship between the farmers and the extension officer. In this case the farmers are regarded as the professionals who should take responsibility for their own actions. The extensionist can merely act as an advisor

or a facilitator of a particular initiative. There is clearly a different power relationship between the farmers and the extension officer in this case. Although this approach to extension may have various advantages one should also be aware of its problems. Such as the following:

- Participatory approach of this nature may be completely foreign to the locals
- Geographical distance may affect cohesion amongst farmers and this can affect indigenous knowledge sharing and communication negatively.
- Group dynamics and leadership styles amongst farmers may complicate matters.
- The different stakeholders in extension may not be in favour of such an approach.
- The infrastructure may not be conducive for participatory development.
- Participatory development requires a lot of imagination and skill and this may be lacking due to limited confidence, experience etc.

## **5. TOWARDS AN ADAPTIVE APPROACH TO EXTENSION**

It has already been emphasised that an adaptive approach to extension and management is in principle participatory. This is more in line with the second approach to participation that equates participation with the control of the development process and includes the following principles:

- There must be openness for continuous experimentation and adaptation. It means acceptance of different viewpoints, responsiveness to what others are saying and expressing and being available for dialogue. In contrast to more historical approaches (prejudice, biases, being closed off) to extension it embraces error as part of a continuous and open-ended learning curve. Farmers are also more willing to participate in activities, which meet their felt needs. It is however important that the needs of all people should be taken into consideration, not just those who are accessible and co-operative.
- Organisational and managerial thinking must change from ivory-tower theory building and research to practical applications. Extension managers and supervisors must be prepared that extensionist and farmers will ask questions and demand answers.

- Transparency and accountability forms a vital part of the extension and development process. The farmers should have a clear idea what extension services can provide and what effect they could expect through regular interaction with farmers, which often demands some kind of farmers' organisation to facilitate the participation. All stakeholders involved should take responsibility and ownership for his or her task. The UBUNTU concept is uniquely African. UBUNTU has the potential to span the great gap between our Northerness and Southerness, and between the individualism and communalism. UBUNTU is a concept that brings to the fore images of supportiveness, cooperation, and solidarity i.e. communalism vs. individualism.
- Extension managers should avoid the following three “blind mice of management” regarding professional and organisational performance – these are by-products of the older paradigm or the industrial age:
  - First beware of “*mirror management*”. Managers assume that employees are “like them” and expect them to respond to identical motivational packages. In short do not try to project your own values onto the employee, customer or client.
  - Secondly, avoid the “*car wash*” mentality. This presumes that others are carbon copies of our own systems; they are all just the same. What works for one must work for all. Managers and supervisors often receive the same psychological “car wash”, whether relevant to the individuals' needs and functions or not.
  - Many extension managers are vulnerable to the “*final state paralysis*” – the belief in an ideal, fixed, and permanent management, organisational structure or bottom line motivation. The way that we have managed in the past, will without any question work in the future (Beck & Linscott, 1994)
- Extension must be able to recognise and understand the principle of spectrums for different colours. By spectrums we mean the unique and diverse displays of different value systems and perceptions that permeate people, communities, and organisations. It is important to create extension managerial models that can deal with all the different colours, both individually and collectively. The extensionists and manager must realise that each colour has its own motivational code – people cannot simply be defined in simple categories and stereotypes.
- Devolution of power: the local authority should have sufficient devolved



power from central government to deal with crises at the local level. Unfortunately the existing bureaucratic political culture is not conducive for this process. Power relations rather than consensus, fostering an adversarial relationship between managers and the managed; inform this traditional style of decision-making. A new overall way of thinking is required which will take account of traditions and culture and we can call it a community concept: *"I am because you are, you are because we are."*

- Shared vision, objectives and values: this cannot be imposed upon the people who have to live them. This is therefore, aversion to the principle of shared vision and values to hope that senior management can design it and then expect the employees or farmers to follow. The sure way of ensuring that the vision and values of an organisation are not shared is to utilise exclusive methods to develop and introduce them, such as management going on a "bosberaad" during which they brainstorm what they believe the vision and values are to be.
- There is a clear need to do training on PRA and Participatory Technology Development (PTD). These practice theories incorporates the hardware and software issues of culture in its methodology. South African extension organisations will have to re-learn the importance of the difference between farmer development and farming development. This demands new learning approaches and environments for new extension staff members and current employees. The major aspect of the extensionists will be the promoting of participation (Oakley, 1991).
- Revitalising of indigenous knowledge. This is an important component of culture. Extension officials should guard against the trap of a market economy and industrialisation. History has proved that unnecessary industrialisation has promoted more poverty in Sub Saharan Africa than anything else. With proper training and support extension officials can tap these knowledge systems with great success and experience has proved that indigenous information can serve as an important basis for development action.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

For the successful application of an agriculture extension programme it is therefore vitally important that the culture diversity of the farming community is addressed. Culture is to humans as water is to fish.

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