

TOWARDS AN APPROPRIATE EXTENSION APPROACH FOR AGRICULTURAL AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA

G.H. Düvel¹

ABSTRACT

Recent paradigm shifts have seen an increase in the interest of new and more appropriate approaches in extension. This paper identifies some of the background reasons and discusses the myths or unfounded assumptions and constraints preventing the search, identification of evolution of appropriate approaches. An overview is given by contrasting extreme approaches using dichotomies and then comparing in some detail the production technology approach and the more participatory and facilitative problem-solving approaches. Ultimately any approach has to be adapted to specific situations and in view of this a series of principles currently important for the South African context are identified and discussed.

1. INTRODUCTION

The recent paradigm shift towards more participatory approaches has resulted in the questioning of many traditional approaches. This also leads to questions – particularly in a transition situation from one millennium to the next -- regarding appropriate approaches for South Africa

The reasons for a reappraisal and questioning of traditional approaches may have been prompted by the fact that in many countries, particularly in the developed first world countries, extension has, from a content point of view, reached a cross roads situation. The extreme complex situation due to extremely high levels of production and sophistication, and exacerbated by overexploitation of resources, pollution, environmental degradation, increased competition, decreasing profit margins, etc. has forced Extension or advisory services to seek wider partnerships to find answers not readily available. In the third world, particularly in Africa, the failure to really make an impact over the long term has also stimulated the interest in new or more effective approaches. Other factors that have contributed towards especially the more participatory approaches are the increased influence of the humanistic philosophy and value system and the greater involvement of

¹ *Professor, Department of Agricultural Economics, Extension and Rural Development, University of Pretoria, Pretoria.*

agricultural researchers and subject matter specialists, social scientists and numerous other disciplines.

2. DISPELLING MYTHS REGARDING EXTENSION APPROACHES

The proliferation of new approaches in extension or an increasing awareness of them has not been only positive. On the negative side could be mentioned the increased confusion and deception, often aggravated by the value attached to certain myths or unfounded assumptions. Some of these are the following:

2.1 Disbanding an inappropriate approach leads to success

A typical example of this myth is the frequent re-organisation common in many institutions. This can be a diversion strategy, but normally the naive assumption is that everything that went wrong in the past can be blamed on the previous approach and that a new approach must lead to success. These changes are consequently seldom associated with prior feasibility studies or later evaluations.

2.2 Solutions lie in extremes

The tendency towards extremes is a common occurrence. In South Africa we have numerous examples: The target audience choice has shifted from an emphasis in commercial farming to an almost exclusive small-farmer focus. In recent years we have seen a dramatic paradigm shift away from the technology-transfer model towards more facilitative and participatory approaches – at least as far as policy is concerned. In many cases this change appears to have taken on such extreme dimensions, that it can even be referred to as a paradigm "slide" rather than a shift. The extremes manifest themselves in phenomena such as, for example, the status or importance attributed to PRA. It is conveniently ignored that extension with its underlying philosophy of "help towards self-help", has always been, at least intentionally, participatory in nature. Instead PRA, although it refers to only a specific method, is seen by many to epitomise everything that extension is all about. Needless to say, it is unreservedly accepted to be the most appropriate method under all circumstances. Associated with this are the claims that only qualitative or "soft" approaches in need assessment are reliable and valid.

Extreme stances are also apparent in regard to the value attached to community needs. Here the controversial issue is whether the community needs (accepting that they have been determined in a reliable and representative manner) have absolute value not only in the sense of

Chambers' (1993) "farmer first" notion, but even to the extent of "farmer only". This complete subordination to the needs of the community is probably rooted in the humanistic philosophy and ethical principle or viewpoint, that the development agent has no right to impose his/her values on the community he/she serves, and consequently his/her function is to assist and help community members in achieving their needs. No wonder that even the concept of Extension is coming under fire.

Is it realistic under all circumstances to assist only in the realisation of felt needs, irrespective of what these needs are? Does it also apply to expressed needs that the development agent cannot condone or identify with (for example, certain political issues, etc.)?. Does it mean that aspects of common good or needs related to resource conservation or long term sustainability cannot be addressed, if they are not the expressed needs of the community or do not feature prominently in the community's need or problem hierarchy?

2.3 Approaches are value neutral or value free

This obviously is not the case. Every approach has some underlying principle(s), the acceptability of which is dependent on one's value system. In some cases the preference of one approach above another may be due to some practicalities, but then the precondition is that the associated principles are value reconcilable.

In a way this implies that imposing a specific approach on a community or its service provider, means imposing a certain value or value system. Even the participatory approach, although not questioned from an ethical or value point of view, could be such a point in case.

A justified question is whether it is possible or realistic for an extension agent to become actively involved and facilitate change without imposing his/her values onto the community. Even protagonists of the so-called "farmer only" notion do not hesitate to promote participation or other values like equity, gender equality, sustainability, etc., even if these were not expressed needs or are not reconcilable with the values or needs of the respective cultures or communities. Perhaps we need to accept that no intervention or involvement by outside agents is possible without indirect imposing of values. If this is the case, then the main difference between approaches lies in the finesse with which values are imposed.

2.4 Approaches have an absolute value

The belief that the superiority or inferiority of approaches is absolute or that there is a "best approach", is in contradiction with research findings regarding the situation specificity of behaviour, extension methods, extension strategies, etc. (Albrecht, 1969). It ignores the complexity of human nature and the dynamic inter-relationship between the person or the community and its environment.

It is this myth that has been responsible for the promotion of approaches such as the T & V System by the World Bank in most developing countries of the world. This approach has now been abandoned, only to be replaced by others such as the KIS (Knowledge Information System) or participatory approach.

3. CONSTRAINTS IN THE SEARCH FOR APPROPRIATE APPROACHES

The search for and adoption of more appropriate approaches, is curtailed not only by the above mentioned myths, but also by other phenomena of which the following are the most important:

3.1 Drive towards uniformity

It is intriguing to observe that most countries have similar extension policies and priorities and promote similar issues (e.g. decentralisation, sustainability, equity, gender equality of quotas, participation, etc.), and this in spite of widely varying circumstances. Is it because they are the ultimate solutions (truth), unquestioned like laws of nature, or is it because they are zealously propagated? The production model was a high priority for many years in the first world before sustainability and ecological aspects became the priority and focus of extension. With Africa "having to conform", will it mean that Africa is expected to short-circuit the production phase? If yes, in whose interest and with what consequences?

3.2 'Visit and leave' development

Many development projects in the third world are initiated and driven by outside or visiting donor organizations. Although their contribution must be appreciated, their focus of involvement is often unnatural so that withdrawal after apparent short-term success, results in collapse. The unnatural involvement could relate to an overabundance viz. abnormal level of resources, or an unnatural target community choice, which seldom coincides

with the service areas of the local extension service and thus complicates the withdrawal and handing over of programs to local service providers.

4. COMPARING MAJOR APPROACHES

By approaches to extension is understood the fundamental, conceptual and functional method of extension adopted to fulfil its aims.

A useful way of contrasting or comparing approaches is the use of dichotomies (Albrecht *et al.*, 1989 and Cristóvão, Koehnen & Portela, 1997). Fig. 1 represents an overview of some of these dichotomies that correspond to somewhat opposite assumptions, principles and practices. In a way they are over-simplifications and in between the two extremes lies a continuum of possibilities or alternatives that can be chosen.

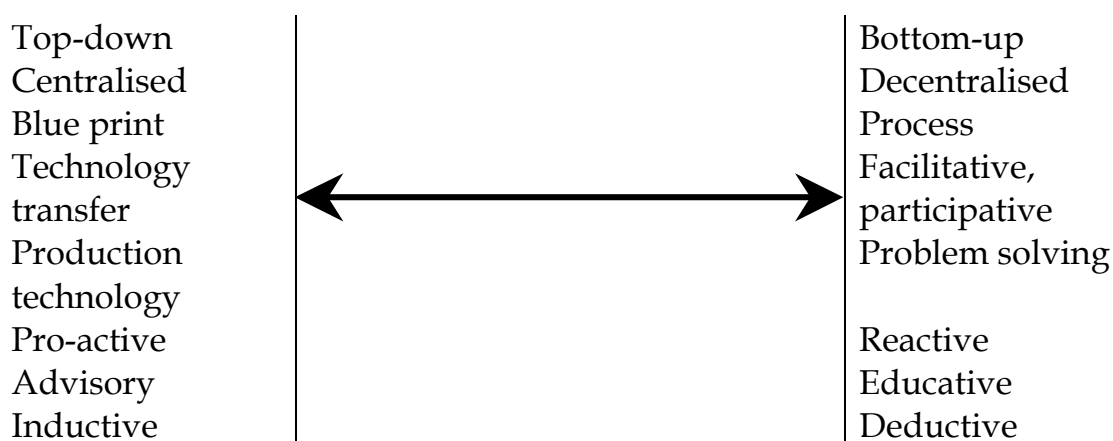


Figure 1: Dichotomies relating to development approaches

Other dichotomies representing alternatives in respect of which choices have to be taken are:

- Public versus private
- Government versus non-government
- Profit versus non-profit
- Free versus cost-recovery
- General versus sector

Perhaps the most prominent approaches representing the extremes summarised in the dichotomies in Fig. 1 are the following:

4.1 Production-technology or technology transfer model

This centralized, top-down and blueprint approach corresponds to the so-called conventional way of developing a programme. Examples are the T & V system and other conventional models stressing the transfer of technology and information dissemination. For example, research stations develop technologies, which are then transferred to the extension service through subject-matter specialists. Extension officers at the ward or district level plan the programmes, defining specific objectives and messages to be disseminated. At the village level, extension workers implement the activities according to fixed work schedules, under close supervision and leadership. Farmers' involvement is not, in general, a priority.

This approach is based on the following principles: There are clearly defined and generally accepted objectives, there is a detailed and precise knowledge of the process to be implemented in order to reach the objectives; there is the political will to use the available power and resources; and there is a predetermined timetable and well-known resources (Dusseldorp & Zijderveld, 1991:21).

Obvious advantages of this approach are that it facilitates management, monitoring and evaluation tasks because activities and expected outcomes are defined and a chain of responsibilities and duties is well identified. It can be the best choice, for example, in emergency interventions where a strong management style may be required to attain objectives in a timely and highly organized manner or where there is pressure for accountability. It often has undesirable side effects, which then cast doubt on the actual success. Although this approach is in general disrepute and has been subject to strong criticism, its successes cannot be denied, like most of the progress in agricultural development in the First world and the so-called Green revolution.

Strong points of criticism have been that it is too uniform and does not take into due account the socio-cultural environment, the particular circumstances in which project implementation occurs, and the characteristics of the different clientele groups. Dissemination of a given technology package is planned without an adequate understanding of the farming systems and the diversity of farmer's problems, potentials, rationales and strategies. The approach also assumes a high degree of simplicity, is rigid and assumes a high level of stability regarding problems that will not change.

4.2 The problem solving approaches

These and other related approaches (decentralised, bottom-up, etc.) correspond, in general terms, to what has been called participatory planning, currently proposed as a key element in farming systems development, farmer-first models (Chambers, Pacey & Thrupp, 1989), participatory technology development (Farrington & Martin, 1993 and Reintjes, Haverkort & Waters-Bayer, 1992), or local process facilitation activities (Röling, 1994).

The guiding principles are quite different from the top-down perspective (Bergdall, 1993; Dusseldorp & Zijderveld, 1991 and Korten, 1991):

- Development is regarded as a long-term effort and process requiring continued commitment and collective responsibility.
- Programme personnel should act as partners and facilitators rather than experts.
- Participation of local actors is stressed.
- More time should be spent on needs identification and project preparation, with the active involvement of the intended beneficiaries.
- Programmes should grow step by step, securing close linkages to the felt needs and the local environment.
- The ultimate goal of the programme is to increase the power of the local actors to plan and implement their own improvements.

With the problem-solving approach, it is the definition of problems that is the cardinal point for the planning and implementation of the extension project. In general, this approach is said to be open and process centred, embracing error as a learning factor and leading to programmes and projects with an emergent nature.

It is clear that this approach is not exempt from problems and criticism. Some are quite evident: For instance, activities start without predefined objectives, making things more difficult for personnel and perhaps confusing for participants who often used to be recipients, not active partners of interventions. The overall philosophy and practices contrast with the conventional ones with which most donors and official services are familiar, and this may complicate relationships. As far as decentralization is concerned,

capacities at local level are still generally weak and ways have to be found to build the capacity of local administrative units to implement development programs. Also important is the issue of participation. It can be argued that participation is not desirable in every situation and that it has advantages and disadvantages. For example, it requires time, which in some instances is not available, and it may lead to social and political conflicts, because it touches the question of power, and those who may lose it are likely to oppose and resist. Undoubtedly, each project situation requires a careful analysis regarding the purposes, which might be accomplished through citizen participation, the ways to achieve it, and the costs and benefits that can be derived from it.

5. RECOMMENDED PRINCIPLES

The above mentioned models represent broad frameworks with tremendous variation within and between them, while the organization of extension demands many more specific choices. These will ultimately depend on the goals and specific situations, but should be guided by certain principles. The following are some of the principles currently regarded to be important in the South African context:

5.1 Participation

The emphasis on participation deserves serious attention, not because it is fashionable or because it is the accepted new paradigm. In fact, extension without participation is inconceivable and the philosophy of extension, viz. "help towards self-help" has always given expression to this and epitomizes and is synonymous with "self-mobilisation", which Pretty (1994) regards to be the highest form or level of participation. Hopefully we have overcome the era where Extension was seen as synonymous with PRA (even by managers and policy makers of Extension) and have come to understand that PRA has to be embedded in a context of many other methods of project implementation.

An important decision to be taken is whether participation is to be viewed as only a means to an end or as an end in itself (normative goal). If the latter is the case, we have to go the full distance of empowerment of the clients and their taking ownership of the programmes and the development process. Subscribing to such a principle will have major implications for the organisation, management, implementation and evaluation of extension, but it is important that these challenges are faced head on. One of the necessary implications is the following:

5.2 Institutional linkage structures

If communities are ever to take ownership of the development process and be empowered to do so, an important condition is an appropriate organisational structure, which can support the process and take it forward. The community structure required is one that serves as an effective linkage structure to facilitate an effective partnership interaction between the development agent (or organisation) and the community.

The linkage structure should, for driving the process of development in partnership with development organisations (agents), essentially provide for

- (a) A representative umbrella organisation, serving as mouthpiece for the total community in negotiation with development organisations and fulfilling the function of priority determination, commissioning supervising and coordinating development projects, etc, and
- (b) The various operational committees (program development committees).

The necessity for linkage structures is increasingly recognised internationally (Hagmann, *et al.*, 1997, and Chamala, 1990) but their correct positioning in terms of level or proximity to the community is paramount. Figure 2 illustrates linkage structures at different levels.

If organisational linkage structures are to facilitate maximum participation and ownership, it stands to reason that they should be as close to the grassroots community as possible. Unless community members regard such organisational structures as their own, they will have difficulty relating to them and effectively participating through them. This also implies that they primarily serve the interest and purpose of the community and not those of the development organisation(s) or agent(s).

In view of this, linkage structures at regional, sub-regional or even district level are not the solution, unless they have a co-ordination function of and arise out of the grassroots communities. If this is not the case, they remain instruments of development organisations and are bound to remain passive and re-active and seldom represent or are regarded as the mouthpiece of the broader communities.

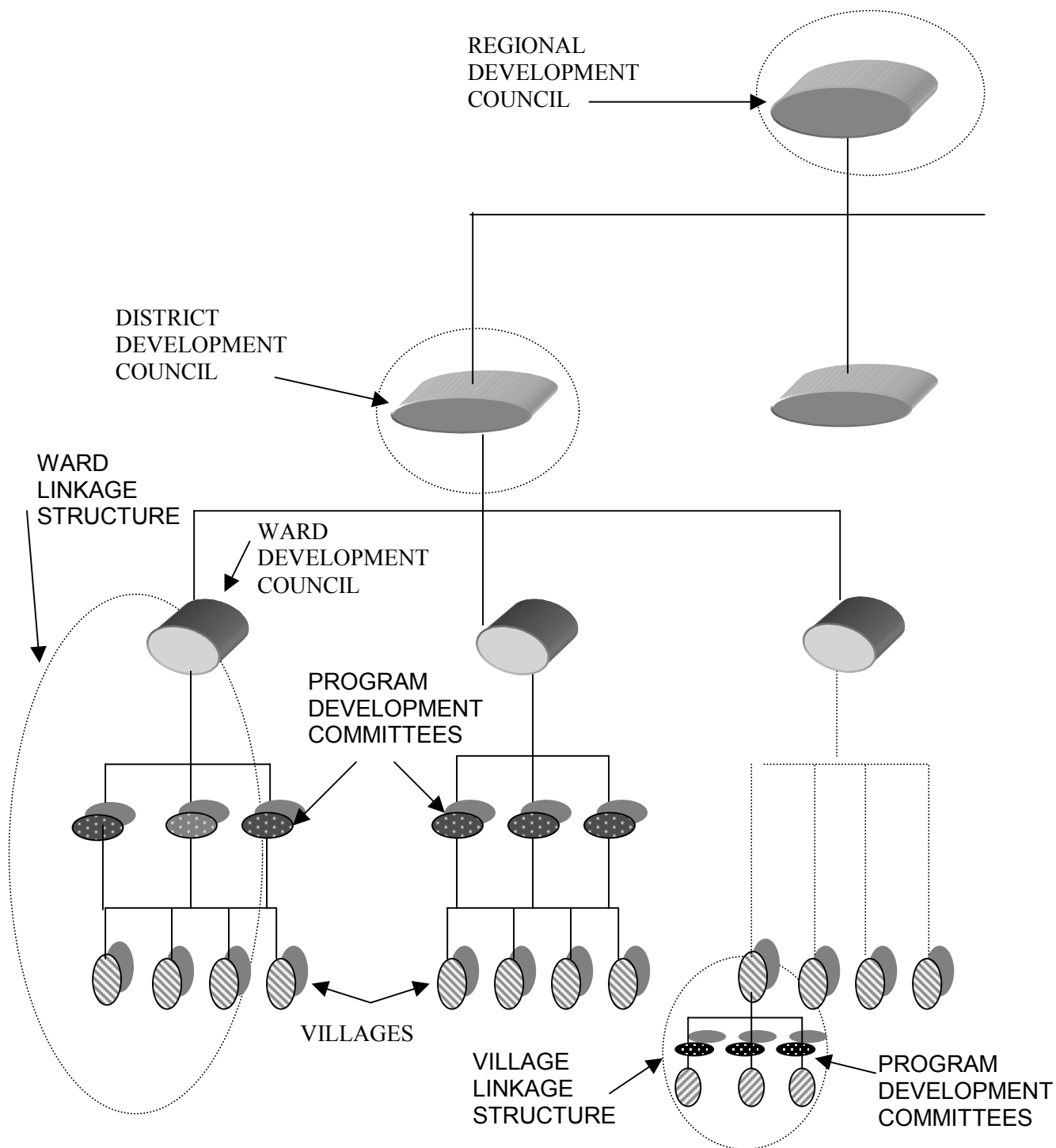


Figure 2: Alternative linkage structures at village, ward or higher level

It is in mainly in this regard that the proposed linkage model differs from the Participative Action Management (PAM) model proposed by Chamala (1990). The major differences lie in the following:

- The PAM model is initiated at a national or macro-community level and is thus essentially of a top-down nature as it unfolds and converges on communities at grassroots level. The proposed linkage model, on the other hand, is focused on the grassroots community and links or networks upwards with institutions at district, provincial or national level.
- The proposed organisational linkage structure consists by and large of representatives of the community or its sub-communities as the stake holders who are empowered to take ownership of the development process. It therefore converges (like a parabolic mirror) the interests from within the community, of which external organisations become partners through their representatives. The PAM model, on the other hand, converges the interests of a large number of – mainly external – role players, with the community being only one of many partners.

Obviously there are also limitations regarding the lowest community or sub-community levels where a linkage and co-ordination structure is appropriate or affordable. I regard Hagmann's model (Hagmann, *et al.* 1997) to be such an example, since its linkage structure is at the lowest, namely at village level. This would be ideal in South Africa if we had the resources and could afford the luxury of such small service areas or wards. As several villages usually comprise an extension ward, the linkage structure at village level is obviously not the solution, since the duplication of these structures in every village would clearly fragment the extension and development process, preventing effective co-ordination and responsible ownership and self-determination.

5.3 Problem focused or enterprise specific approach

The systems approach, although logical and in accordance with fashionable international thinking, has its limitations. These also apply to the KIS (Knowledge Information System) or AKIS (Agricultural Knowledge Information System) of which Röling & Engel (1991) and others are protagonists. It is questionable whether the knowledge system theory can effectively grasp the dynamics and complexities of knowledge processes. I believe that a theoretical approach based on an 'actor-oriented' rather than a 'systems' perspective is more meaningful and appropriate. If the 'real world' does not exist apart from the sets of subjective perceptions and evaluations of

particular social actors, then clearly one is dealing with 'multiple realities' and potentially conflicting social and normative interests.

In practice this means a problem orientation or focus, where the scope of the problem may include --depending on the individual and the specific situation -- the whole farming or knowledge system or be restricted to only a sub-system or facet thereof. This view is also reconcilable with the phenomenon that the human being has a multitude of needs, which are relevant in different spheres and can, although extremely divergent in nature, exist concurrently without being necessarily simultaneously relevant. This justifies a focused approach, which according an assessment of isolated success cases in the resource poor African context, is likely to be more effective. I regard, especially for the South African context, the enterprise focus as the most appropriate. It allows for priority and target group approaches and provides for some subject specialisation with its obvious advantages related to credibility.

5.4 Professionalism in intervention

The complexity and challenge of extension, namely to identify a problem related technical solution, adapt it to specific local physical circumstances, and make it appropriate for the individual farmers in the context of his needs, aspirations, preferences and financial restrictions, requires real professionalism. Extension is, therefore, more than a methodology or the skills to effectively use them. Ultimately, it is not so much the approach that determines success, or even the choice of methods or how skilfully they are used, but the proper understanding of the principles of behaviour change and the ability to - with the help of useful and appropriate theories -- effectively intervene.

5.5 Purposeful evaluative approach

The necessity for a purposeful or programmed approach in South Africa, allowing for effective monitoring and evaluation is beyond debate. What should be debated is how this can be effectively done. The biggest challenges in this regard are:

- The regular input focused monitoring of behaviour determinants being the immediate precursors to decision making;
- More intensive and detailed objectives that can potentially provide for a much wider basis of progress evidence;

- The inclusion of general development focused attitude and capacity building changes into program objectives;
- Accommodating more flexibility in programs through the subdivision of the program into phases (Albrecht *et al.*, 1989) and/or through the full-cover approach providing for all variations in prevailing cognitive field force constellations as well as potential responses to planned interventions;
- More support and protection from supervisors and managers enabling staff to stick to and not deviate from committed programs.

5.6 Effective institutional management

Poor institutional management is reputedly one of the most serious constraints facing agricultural extension in South Africa. This judgement rests in particular on the reasoning that improvement in this field would, due to its multiplying effect, have the biggest impact. The limitation is not so much a lack of general management skills, but rather the misconception that proper management of extension is possible without an intimate knowledge of extension. In fact the insight and knowledge of extension and its process should even be more extensive and more detailed than that of the subordinates or front-line extensionists. It is only then and with the necessary commitment that effective guidance and management can be given and that 'downward' rather than 'upward' directed service is rendered.

REFERENCES

ALBRECHT, H., 1969. *Innovationsprozesse in der Landwirtschaft*. Schriften des Sozialwissenschaftlichen Studienkreises für Internationale Probleme (SSIP) e.V. Saarbrücken: Verlag der SSIP-Schriften.

ALBRECHT; H., BERGMANN, H., DIEDERICH, G., GROSSER, E., HOFFMANN, V., KELLER, P., PAYR, G. & SÜLZER, R., 1989. *Rural development series: agricultural extension. Volume I Basic concepts and methods*. Eschborn: Technical Cooperation, Federal Republic of Germany.

BERGDALL, T.D., 1993. *Methods for active participation: Experiences in rural development from East and Central Africa*. Nairobi: Oxford University Press.

CHAMBERS, R., 1993. *Challenging the professions: frontiers for rural development*. London: Intermediate Technology Publications.

CHAMBERS, R., PACEY, A. & THRUPP, L.A., 1989. *Farmer first: Farmer, innovation and agricultural research*. London: Intermediate Technology Publications.

CRISTÓVÃO, A., KOEHNEN, T. & PORTELA, J., 1997. Developing and delivering extension programmes. In Swanson, B.E. (ed.) *Agricultural Extension: A Reference Manual*. Rome, Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations.

DUSSELDORP, D. & ZIJDERVELD, K., 1991. *Preparation and implementation of development projects in the third world*. Wageningen: Wageningen Agricultural University.

FARRINGTON, J. & MARTIN, A., 1993. *Farmer participation in agricultural research: A review of concepts and practices*. London: ODI.

HAGMANN, J., MURWIRA, K. & CHUMA, E., 1997. Learning together: Development and Extension of Soil and Water Conservation in Zimbabwe. *Quarterly J. of International Agriculture*, 35(2):142-162.

KORTEN, D.C., 1991. Rural development programming: The learning process approach. *Rural Development Participation Review*, 2(2):1-8.

PRETTY, J.N., 1994. Alternative systems of inquiry for sustainable agriculture. *IDS Bulletin*, 25(2), 37-48. University of Sussex: IDS.

REIJNTJES, C., HAVERKORT, B. & WATERS-BAYER, A., 1992. *Farming for the future: An introduction to low input and sustainable agriculture*. London: Macmillan.

RÖLING, N.G. & ENGEL, P.G.H., 1991. *IT from a knowledge system perspective: Concepts and issues*. Proceedings of the European Seminar on Knowledge Management and Information Technology. Agricultural University, Department of Extension Science, Wageningen, The Netherlands.

RÖLING, N., 1994. Extension and the sustainable management of natural resources. In: *11th European Seminar on Extension Education*. August 30 – September 4, 1993. The Danish Agricultural Advisory Centre. Skejby, pp. 45-56.