

PURPOSES, GOALS AND CHALLENGES REGARDING FARMERS' PARTICIPATION IN AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION SERVICES IN NKHOTAKOTA DISTRICT, MALAWI

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ABSTRACT

The study investigates the views of extension staff regarding the purpose or goal of participation, the current practice of participation and the degree of participation expected by extension staff as well as constraints to community participation in extension in Malawi. The focus is on Nkhotakota district where 109 extension workers were involved in group interview sessions allowing extensive interaction and discussion before individuals recorded their viewpoints regarding various issues.

In this study, participation is perceived equally as a goal and as a means as opposed to either the one or the other. All purposes of participation are regarded as important, however, the contribution of participation to improved sustainability, more effective extension or rural development as well as towards self-help and self-sufficiency received wider support. The study concludes that the level of community involvement in extension is generally low. Among service providers, NGOs are more advanced in implementing a participation leading towards ownership and self-determination compared to other organisations. The most acceptable degree of participation is where the service providers and community mutually share, as equal partners, the responsibilities of initiating, planning, financing, coordinating and implementing of

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development programmes or projects. The major constraints, which hinder communities' involvement in agricultural extension, are lack of formal education of farmers, unwillingness of researchers and extension agents to involve farmers and inadequate resources available to service providers.

1. INTRODUCTION

For more than a decade now, there has been a significant paradigm shift towards more participatory approaches in extension and rural development (Düvel, 2000). Participation of farmers in agriculture and the development process in general is nowadays more generally accepted as a very important principle of Extension. In spite of this, there are different interpretations as to what participation is and how it should be implemented in practice.

The department of agricultural extension services has been the central implementing agency responsible for agricultural extension services in Malawi. However, since the 1990s many changes have taken place leading to the development of new national extension policy which was launched in 2000 under the heading *Agricultural Extension in the New Millennium: Towards Pluralistic and Demand-driven Services in Malawi (DAES, 2000)*. In light of this change, participation by clients or communities in agricultural extension has become a key guiding principle in implementing the new agricultural extension policy. But how well is participation understood or perceived? Answering this question required a thorough understanding of issues regarding participation and involvement. The purpose of this paper is to present the views of extension staff regarding the purpose or goal of participation, the current practice of participation and the level or degree of participation expected by extension staff as well as constraints to community participation in extension in Nkhotakota district in Malawi.

2. METHODOLOGY

For reasons of practical accessibility and limited financial resources for the study, Nkhotakota district was selected as a survey area. Nkhotakota is one of the nine districts in the central region of Malawi.

Semi-structured questionnaires were used for data collection from the 109 agricultural extension staff from both the public and private sectors working in the District. Respondents were invited to attend data collecting meetings that were organized in various parts of the District. Each respondent completed the questionnaire individually based on his or her perceptions regarding participatory extension. However, any clarifications or questions that were raised by a particular respondent were shared among all respondents in a particular meeting and also shared at subsequent meetings.

The semi-structured questionnaire was developed based on participation principles and alternatives that were identified in the study into appropriate extension approaches by Düvel (2002). Prior to the survey the questionnaire was validated through perusal by extension experts in the district and extensively pre-tested before being administered by the researcher.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Purpose or goal of participation

Düvel, (2002) points out that the principle of maximum community participation is based on the notion of self-determination, self-reliance, self-responsibility and self-help as a normative goal. This implies that involvement should be extended to the ultimate of empowerment and ownership of the development process. A further reason for emphasising participation is that it is associated with greater effectiveness. Cohen & Uphoff, as cited by Düvel, (2002), have found that people adjust to change most rapidly when they initiate, identify and solve problems that directly affect their welfare. Emphasis on participation and involvement ultimately also contributes to an increased sustainability in development. Another major consideration relates to the democratic values of the individual, which have been widely recognised and accepted as a basic need and right (e.g. by United Nations Organisations), and have consequently become a primary goal of development, (Düvel, 2002). Figure 1 reflects extension staff's assessment of the importance of these different purposes of participation.

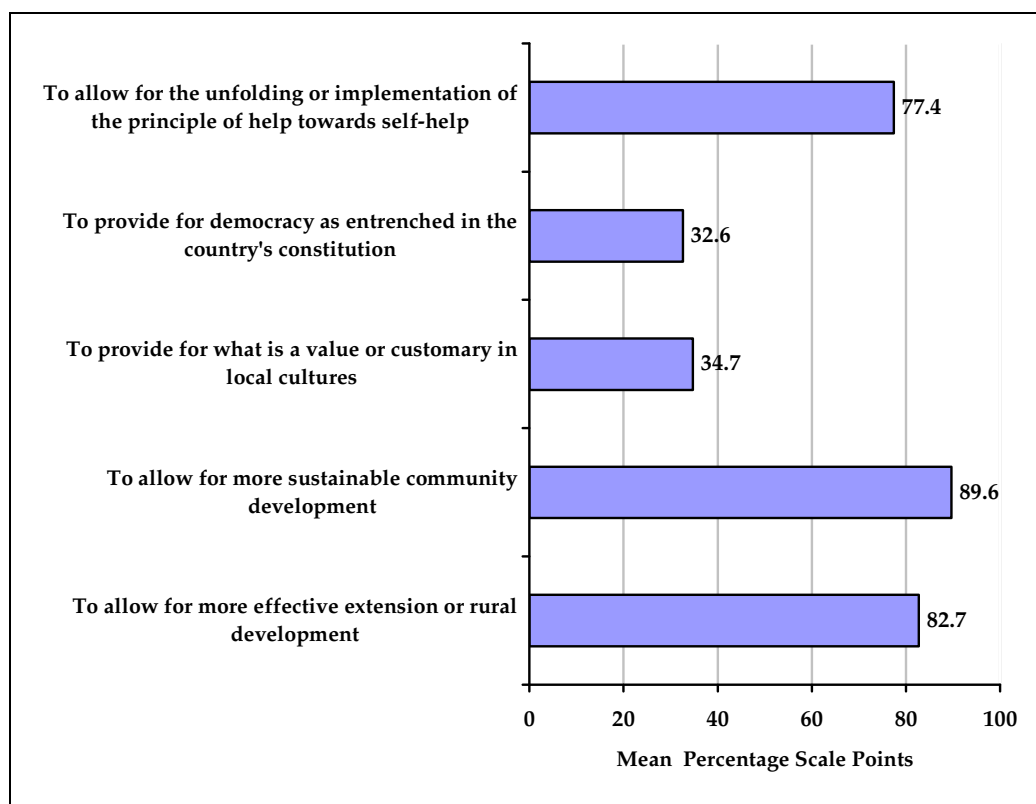


Figure 1: The assessment of different purposes of participation (expressed as a mean percentage scale point) by extensionists (N=109)

All the purposes of participation are regarded as important. The contribution of participation to improved sustainability and more effective extension or rural development received assessments of more than 80 percent, with the contribution towards self-help and self-sufficiency being regarded only slightly less important (77.4 percent). Less important, though still a vital consideration, is the compatibility with democratic and customary values (32.6 percent and 34.7 percent respectively).

3.2 Participation as a means to an end or as a means only

The most outstanding alternatives regarding participation are whether participation is seen as a means to an end or as an end in itself (Düvel, 2002). Figure 2 shows the extension agents' rank order of alternative uses of participation based on the following alternatives:

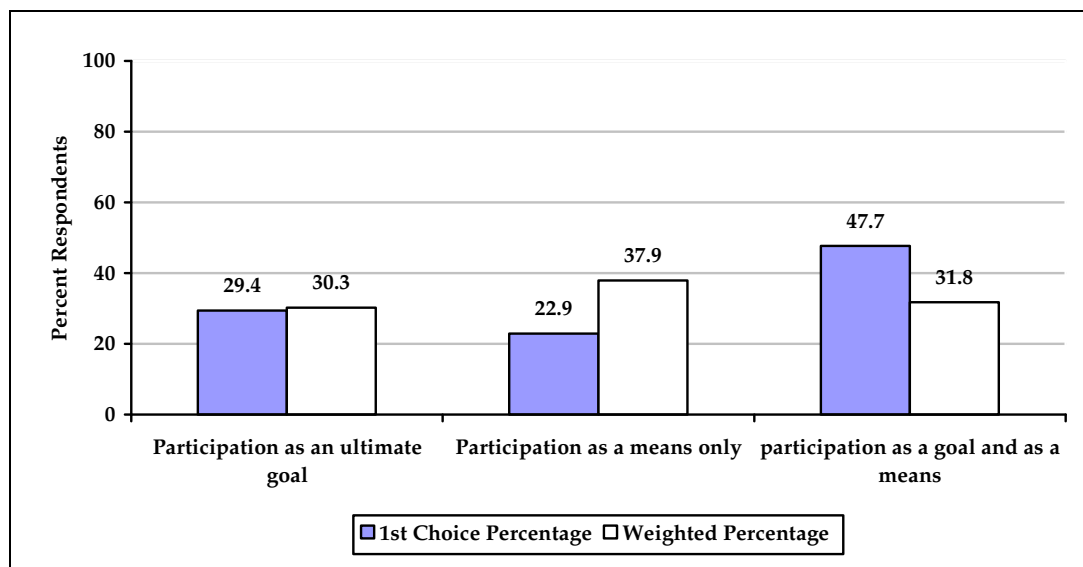


Figure 2: Respondents' importance rank order of alternative uses of participation expressed by first choice and by weighted percentages (N=109)

1. Participation as an ultimate goal (i.e. to promote self-reliance, self-sufficiency and self-responsibility) should be the ultimate and primary goal of a public extension service (normative goal).
2. Participation as means only (i.e. it should contribute towards the development intervention being more effective in the form of better support, more identification, more sustainability, etc.).
3. Participation as goal and as a means (combination of 1 and 2).

Participation as a goal and as a means received the highest ranking. Most respondents (47.7%) chose the participation as a goal and as a means as their first priority. The high ranking of participation as a means when expressed as a weighted percentage is because it received the highest number of second positions, but it does reflect relatively strong support for participation solely as a means for better extension or more sustainable development.

3.3 Participation in agricultural extension services in practice

The term “participation” is now part of the normal language of many development agencies (Pretty, 1995). It is so fashionable that almost everyone says that participation is part of his or her work. But more often than not, people are asked or dragged into partaking in operations of no interest to them, in the very name of participation (Rahnema, 1992). The extension staffs viewpoints regarding the meaning and purpose of participation are likely to become manifested in the way communities are involved in extension. Support for the participation alternatives differ significantly, as shown by the findings in Figure 3.

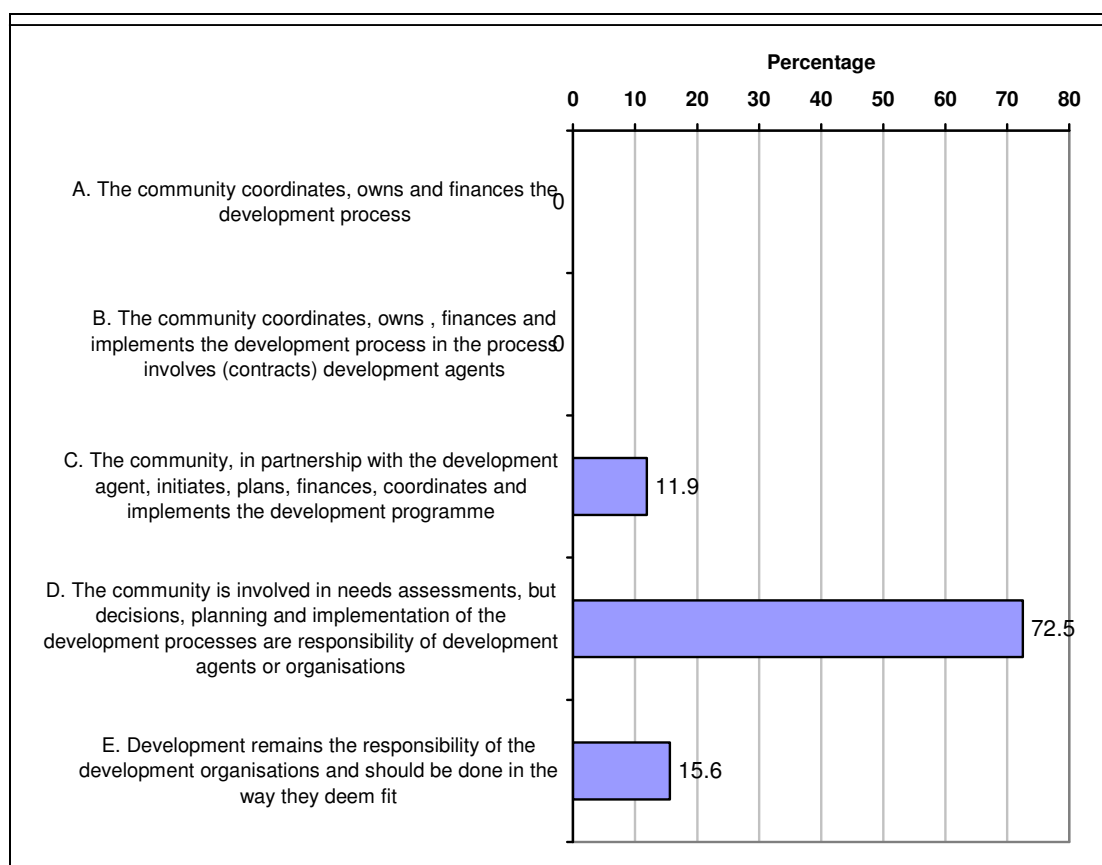


Figure 3: Distribution of extension agents according to their views regarding the participation alternative dominant in their communities (N=109)

The level or degree of community participation in agricultural extension activities is generally low. A clear majority, namely 72.5 percent of the

respondents interpret the current participation or involvement of communities as the type of development where the community is involved in needs assessments, but decisions, planning and implementation of the development processes are the responsibility of the development agent or organisations. A further 15.6 percent indicate that at the moment, development remains the responsibility of the development organisations. Alternatives A and B do not feature at all. Judging from these responses, it is very clear that in most communities in the study area there is tremendous scope for improvement as far as involvement and true participatory development is concerned. These findings support Pretty's (1995) emphasis that the term "participation" should not be accepted without proper clarification.

3.4 Extension organisations involvement in participatory extension

Pretty (1995) observes that development organisations interpret and use the term participation in different ways and he identifies up to seven types. These range from manipulative and passive, where people are told what is to happen and act out predetermined roles, to self-mobilisation, where people take initiatives largely independent of external institutions.

The inadequate participation and involvement of communities in development in general and agricultural extension in particular (Düvel, 2002), is widely appreciated. Evidence of this from the current study, is shown in Figure 4 and manifests itself in the fact that close to 70 percent of the respondents assess the degree of involvement to be 6 and less on a 10-point semantic scale.

The findings in Figure 5, which reflect the extent of involvement in agricultural extension by organisations, indicate in general that extension organisations in the district are miles away from the type of participation that implies or leads to self-reliance, self-sufficiency and self-responsibility, as alternatives A and B do not feature at all. However, there are significant differences between organisations ($\text{Chi}^2 = 23.879$; $\text{df} = 4$; $p = .000$), for example, the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are more advanced in implementing participation leading towards ownership and self-determination. Evidence of this is that out of the thirteen (13) extension staff that

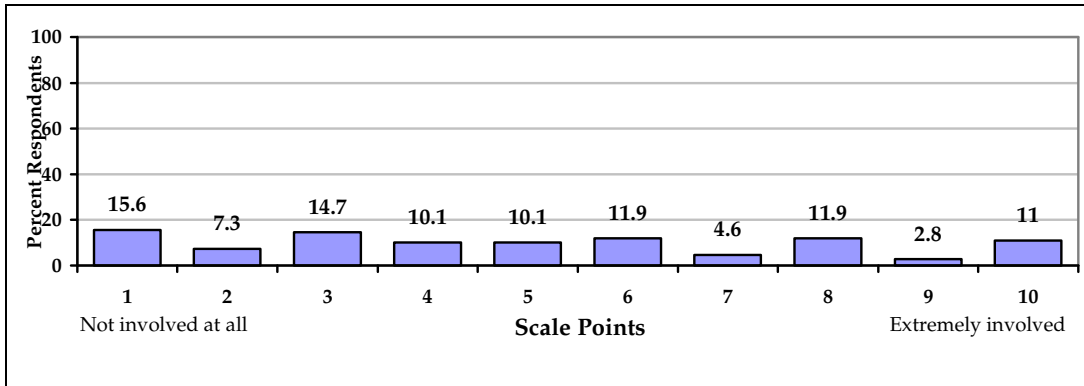


Figure 4: ↑ Distribution of extension staff according to their assessment of their organisations involvement in participatory extension (N=109)

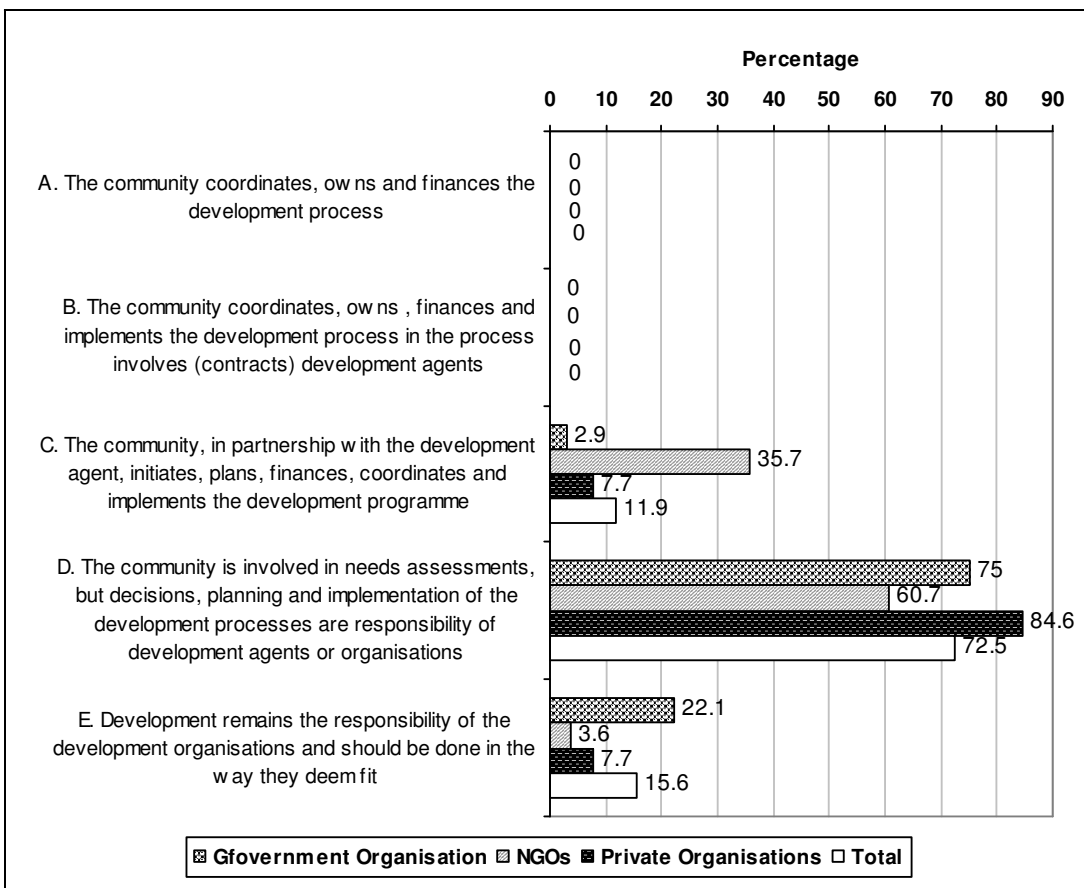


Figure 5: Distribution of extensionists according to the participation alternative practiced and the type of organisations they belong to (N=109)

indicate that alternative C is used in the communities they work, ten (10) are from the NGOs. This could be attributed to the fact that most dependent on donor funding, are compelled to comply with their requirements, one of which being strong community involvement and participation in extension programmes or projects.

3.5 The degree of participation expected in agricultural extension service

Srivanasan (1990) and Oakley (1991) have identified three main concepts of community participation namely, participation as a contribution made by the community, participation as an organisational process of the community, and participation as an empowerment of the community. These concepts of community participation formed the basis for the revised participation scale or participation alternatives that were used in the survey. To establish the degree or level of participation most acceptable, respondents were requested to place the participation alternatives in rank order of acceptability. The findings are summarised in Figure 6.

The most acceptable participation alternative is where the service provider and community mutually share, as equal partners, the responsibilities of initiating, planning, financing, coordinating and implementing of development programmes or projects (45 percent and 24.6 percent, first choice percentage and weighted percentage respectively). This is followed by the participation alternative B where the community carries comparatively more responsibility. The least acceptable is the one where the major responsibility lies with the extension worker or service provider. It is clear from the responses that participation in agricultural extension services is a possibility since the most extensionists are keen to take a step towards more participatory extension.

3.6 Major constraints to community participation in extension services

Obstacles to community participation are identified in the attitudes and practices of the personnel of development agencies and field staff and in the community itself (Cohen, 1996).

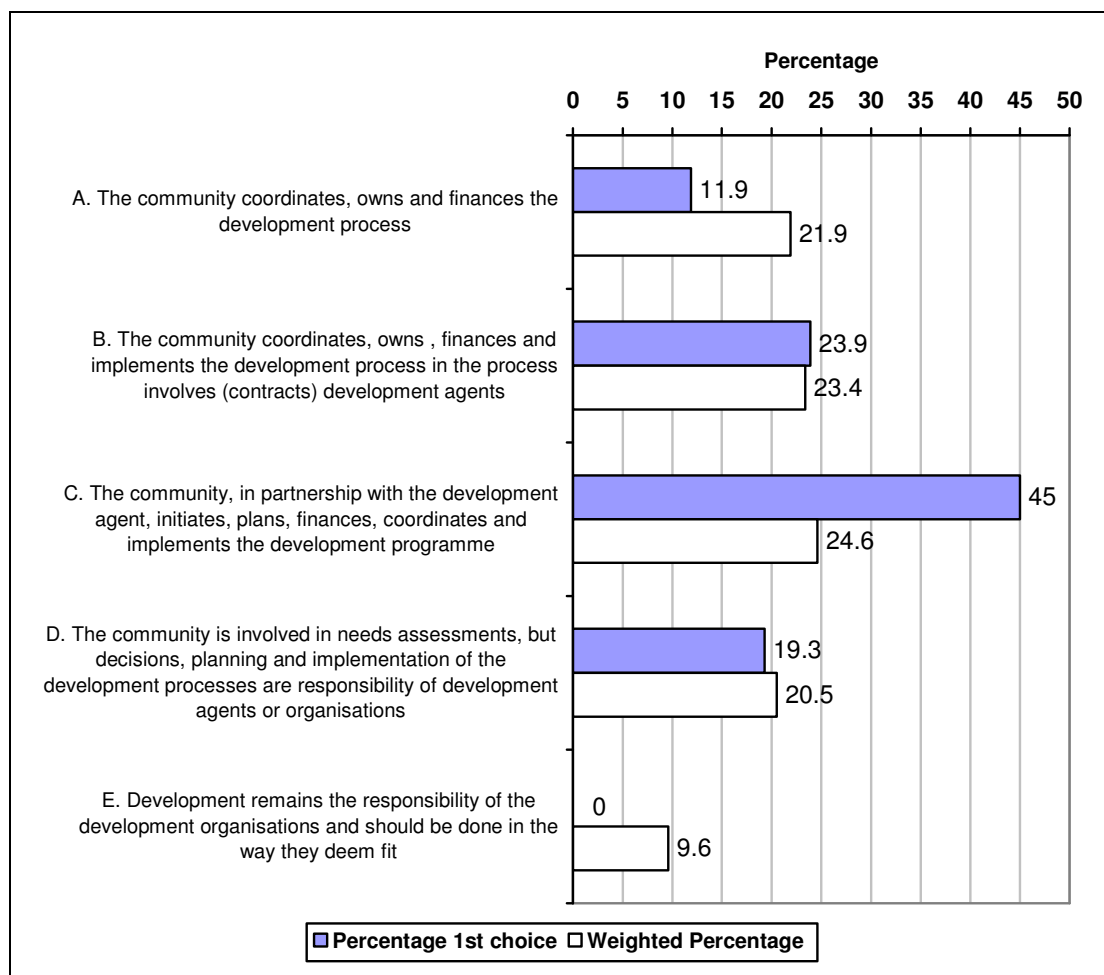


Figure 6: The respondents' ranking (percentage first choice and rank order percentage) of the acceptability of participation alternatives (N=109)

The major constraints, which hinder communities' involvement in agricultural extension services, as indicated by the extension staff (Table 1), are lack of formal education of farmers (38.5%), unwillingness of researchers and extension agents to involve farmers (29.4%) and inadequate resources by service providers (23.9%). A general observation that can be made regarding constraints to participation, as indicated by both farmers and extension staff, is that most developmental policies that are implemented by the department of agriculture follow an inflexible top-down or centralized extension approach rather than a bottom-up approach. This makes it very difficult for communities to become involved.

Table 1: Major constraints to participation in agricultural extension work as perceived by extension staff (N=109)

Type of constraint	Number of times cited	Percentage
Lack of formal education of farmers	42	38.5
Lack of willingness of researchers and extension agents to involve farmers.	32	29.4
Lack of resources by service providers	26	23.9
Most smallholder farmers are so used to free handouts	23	21.1
High cost of production inputs	18	16.5
HIV/AIDS epidemic	16	14.7
Poverty	17	15.6
Inadequate extension staff	15	13.8
Poor motivation and encouragement of farmers to participate by researchers and extension officers	14	12.8
Lack of coordination among extension service providers	7	6.4

The other constraints that also need attention are: HIV/AIDS epidemic, poverty, high cost of production inputs and farmers being so used to handouts. Poverty, free handouts, and high cost of inputs have similar implications. Up to the 1980s agricultural extension in Malawi was closely linked to provision of inputs on loan. Since it was phased out, farmers no longer see the need of being part of agricultural extension activities because they do not have access to the required production inputs. HIV/AIDS has had a big impact on farming families. Much less time is being spent in their fields because farmers are either sick or spending much more time taking care of the sick.

Since the major reasons for lack of participation of farmers in agricultural extension are related to the extension approach, initiation of the process of participatory agricultural extension would have to be done at the higher management level. Once the approach is changed and farmers are involved at every stage of the research and extension processes most of the current problems are likely to disappear or become less serious.

As can be seen from the Table 1, a lack of institutional linkages and structures has not been cited as a reason for inadequate participation. The importance of these structures, however, should not be overlooked, because no meaningful participation can take place without them. Düvel, (2000) argues that without institutional linkages and structures, participation to the level of self-mobilisation is not possible.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Although there is general support for participatory development and also for the various goals and purposes, the current practical implementation and the expressed priorities regarding the degree of practical implementation show the following:

- The level or degree of community participation in agricultural extension activities is generally low. A clear majority interprets the current practice of participation, as the type where the community is involved in needs assessments, but decisions, planning and implementation of the development processes are the responsibility of the development agent or organisations. This alternative is not conducive to more optimal levels of community participation in development.
- The biggest support lies in participation as a means to improve extension rather than an end in itself or the normative goal, namely capacitating and leading communities towards empowerment, self-determination and self-sufficiency.
- The most acceptable and practical alternative is a partnership approach with responsibilities shared equally between the community and the development agent(s) or organisations.
- All extension organisations in the district are still far removed from a level of participation that is conducive to community empowerment. However, it is noteworthy that some NGOs in the district are more advanced in this regard.
- The major constraints, which hinder communities' involvement in agricultural extension services, are, according to extension personnel, lack of formal education by farmers, unwillingness of researchers

and extension agents to involve farmers and inadequate resources by services providers.

The discrepancy between the articulated support for participatory development and its real practical implementation appears to be less a matter of lip service, but rather one of different interpretation of what participatory development is and especially what is regarded as most acceptable. This does indicate that the path towards full participation can be a lengthy one and might have to be adapted depending on situation-specific circumstances. It also implies that under certain circumstances a less participatory approach may be more appropriate. However, it may be that what is seen to be appropriate by extension staff and service providers may differ starkly from what the communities and its leaders perceive.

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