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Participatory management in public extension services

by MIGUEL LOUREIRO

Introduction

National Agricultural Extension Services (NAES) are usually criticised for not doing enough, not doing what they do well enough, and not being relevant enough to clients/farmers. This criticism applies to many public service delivery organisations worldwide. Participatory approaches can improve them by making them more demand-driven and accountable. In this article I will describe how management and field staff of Ohangwena, a region of Namibia, have improved the efficiency and responsiveness of the services they offer by making them more participatory (see also Loureiro, 2002).

I wrote this article with middle-level managers in NAES in mind. These professionals occupy the top positions at regional and divisional level. They are usually in the front line when implementing new approaches, due to their accurate knowledge of their organisations' existing structures and problems (Thompson, 1995). Also, they are closer to the end receivers (clients/farmers) than higher level officials, and tend to be younger and therefore more willing to experiment with different approaches. This article may also be useful to middle-level managers of other governmental service delivery organisations where settings tend to be similar (e.g. water supply, sanitation, health, education), since the innovations this article discusses are primarily managerial rather than agricultural.

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Ohangwena's organisational culture

The Department of Extension and Engineering Services (DEES) of the Namibian Ministry of Agriculture, Water, and Rural Development (MAWRD) is divided into four divisions (South, North-East, North-Central, and North-West) and thirteen regions.

Since the mid-1990s MAWRD has used a Farming Systems Research and Extension (FSRE) approach. This involves farmers, extension workers, and researchers working as partners in participatory and collaborative research and extension, and takes a 'farm as a system' perspective. FSRE replaced the previously dominant transfer of technology (ToT) strategy. After initial apathy and uncertainty about how to implement the new approach, MAWRD organised a series of workshops between 1997 and 1999,

Figure 1: Farming season and DEES activities in Ohangwena

	August	September	October	November	December	January	February	March	April	May	June	July
Rainfall	Good season											
	Bad season											
Farming			Sowing				Pest and weed management			Harvest		
Annual workplan and budget										Village	Region	Nation
Participatory monitoring & evaluation										Feed-back		
Performance needs assessment												
Workshop												
Fairs & shows			Fair								Show	
Event & activities calendar												

initially for middle managers and later on for technicians, to help DEES staff internalise FSRE.¹ At the end of these workshops I felt that younger staff, both managers and technicians, were more willing to adapt the more participatory approach of FSRE, while older staff preferred the more top-down ToT. There were a number of factors that contributed to this:

- Firstly, younger staff had been working for MAWRD on average since the early 1990s², and therefore had little contact with ToT, while older staff members were used to ToT, making it harder to adapt to a new approach.
- Secondly, older staff had been working at MAWRD before Independence, when the bureaucracy was under the South African Apartheid regime. This tended to be highly top-down and discouraged staff from offering feedback and criticism, considering it even disrespectful at times.
- Thirdly, while the level of education was the same for younger and older staff, the quality was different, with younger staff having learnt 'newer' farming practices and methods to engage with farmers.

- Fourthly, younger staff are more able to admit they do not know everything and consequently have no problems asking for assistance from other staff, increasing horizontal participation.³

Ohangwena region not only has a large majority of younger staff at field level (nine out of 13 technicians), but also has the youngest Chief Officer and Extension Officer of any region. The two Chief Technicians are also supportive: one is an older staff member who knows all the 'tricks' of the bureaucratic system. The other is an ex-freedom fighter belonging to the former royal household of the Kwanyama, the main tribe of Ohangwena which makes up about 90% of the region's inhabitants, and commands a lot of respect for that reason. All four managers live in government houses in the same street, despite coming from different towns and villages (and ethnic groups), and have grown to like each other and developed a strong friendship.

Technicians live in their posts full time and hence are in close contact with the farmers of their area 24 hours a day. Management and technicians work as one solid unit, willing to experiment with different methods and techniques if they feel they will benefit their work and 'their' farmers.

¹ Throughout the text, I use 'management' for the middle-level officers (one Chief Officer, two Chief Technicians, and one Extension Officer), and 'technicians' for field staff.

² Namibia gained Independence in 1990.

³ I am, of course, generalising, as there are a few examples of older staff behaving in a 'young' way.

Figure 2: Example of questions used with farmers during PM&E (adapted)

What did you learn from the technician? Does he/she know about this?
How easy/difficult is it for you to contact him/her/us?
Did you teach him/her anything?
What were your problems before his/her/our intervention?
What are the main problems that you face now?
What other improvements have you noticed (not agriculture-related)?
If the technician stopped coming here, would you still work together? How? Why?
How can we improve our services?

Ohangwena’s procedures and practices

In this section, I will describe management innovations in planning and budgeting, monitoring and evaluation, staff performance assessment, internal communication, interaction with stakeholders, and publicising activities. Figure 1 shows when each of these activities takes place in the year.

Planning and budgeting (all for plan and plan for all)

Each year, each region has to submit its annual workplan and budget (AW&B) to its division. These are then compiled into a national annual workplan and budget. Usually, the management in each region devises its AW&B, sometimes consulting technicians. In Ohangwena, management felt that since they were planning for the farmers, the farmers themselves should have a say in the process.

So, during the month of May, each technician meets with his/her farmer groups and assists them in brainstorming activities they want to carry out with DEES assistance. Later, the heads of each group meet at constituency level and prepare an annual workplan for the constituency (also known as Annual Assessment and Planning). In the final week of June all technicians and management conduct a three-day joint workshop where the region’s annual workplan and budget are drafted, taking into consideration farmer groups’ annual plans and following the DEES’s logframe. Management then submits its workplan and budget to the division for comments, and the final workplan and budget are finalised by mid-July. During the same month, the technicians give feedback to each farmer group during a series of meetings, followed by active discussion.

This process involves farmers/clients in the planning stage, giving them a sense of ownership and catering to their real needs, as opposed to the needs perceived by the government. It also makes the budgeting exercise more cost-effective.

Figure 3: Shortened version of questionnaire used with field staff during PM&E

Activity	Number	%	Attendance		Achievements
			male	female	
Demonstrations					
Exposure Visits					
Farmer training					
Field days					
Stakeholders					
Private sector					
Surveys					
Ad-hoc					

Monitoring and Evaluation (listen, but do not judge)

Until recently, each region was directed to use the month of March to monitor the stage of crops, pastures, and livestock. In 2001, Ohangwena management decided that, since MAWRD now had access to satellite imagery, this exercise was a waste of time. So they decided to monitor **themselves** instead.

Each day in early March, the management team visits, interviews, and discusses its performance with one technician and a selected farmer group working with that technician. In the morning, management holds a question and answer session with the farmer group (Figure 2). In the afternoon, the technicians and management discuss individual performances using an easy-to-fill-in questionnaire (Figure 3), with technicians drawing on their notes and monthly workplans. Both activities (with farmers and technicians) are done in an informal way (the motto is ‘listen, but do not judge’).

Coming back to the office, the management team prepares a report of the main findings, making use of monthly and quarterly regional reports to cross-check data (see Embundile et al., 2001). This report is later distributed to all field staff for discussion with farmer groups and the outcomes are fed back to management. It is also distributed among DEES and main stakeholders, and later used as a planning tool during the AW&B.

Since its inception, PM&E has also involved farmers, technicians, and management from other regions in the planning and implementation stages. It has helped management to see what really happens in the field, both successes and failures. Technicians realised that their performance is crucial and that someone above (management) and below (farmers) is paying attention to it. Farmers feel that their opinions matter. Summing up, this exercise has helped to improve the responsiveness of the extension services and empower farmers.

Figure 4: Shortened version of PNA done in Ohangwena

DEES Job Activities for the North-Central Division	Factors for effective performance of job activities			
	Management support	Collaboration/ partners	Training	Resources & logistics
Identify farmers' agricultural technology needs				
Collect information on existing technologies (ITK)				
Distribute information materials				
Coordinate farmers' training programme				
Other activities				

SCORING METHOD:

- ✓ Rank each box 1,2,3, or 4 (1 the most important factor to perform the activity and 4 being the least important)
- ✓ Write in each box why you gave that ranking to that particular factor (what specifically do you need to perform that activity?)
- ✓ Each row (activity) should have only one 1, one 2, one 3 and one 4
- ✓ This exercise is to be done individually, as some activities are particular to certain staff

Training (TNA vs PNA)

These days almost every organisation has a Training Needs Assessment exercise, but training is not the only answer to improving performance. In 1999, Dr Ipaye, head of a UNDP programme (Ohangwena Pilot Poverty Reduction Programme), and Mrs Nesongano from the University of Namibia developed the Performance Needs Assessment (PNA). PNA works as an assessment tool to determine what staff need in order to increase performance (not only training, but also management support, co-operation from colleagues and stakeholders, and resources). It was tried in Ohangwena that year and institutionalised in the following years (see Figure 4). This exercise is done by all staff during the month of June (at the same time as the AW&B) and compiled and analysed by management shortly after. During the next monthly meeting, management and technicians discuss the results, try to improve managerial support, and linkages with stakeholders, and prioritise training needs. The resources and logistics criterion is dealt through the AW&B.

To meet training needs, management organises a 'pre-season' workshop during September. The workshop is mainly technical, lasts for approximately one week, and is attended by all staff. As far as possible, local staff are invited to be trainers/facilitators. This helps reduce training costs and empowers local staff.

Monthly meetings (informal chats)

Every month, usually during the second week, all staff meet for half a day at a regional meeting. A number of techniques used at these meetings have improved the efficiency of the organisation.

- Working on attitudes is a must: an informal, relaxed environment puts all staff at ease and helps them to discuss even the most sensitive topic.

- Planning: the pre-determination of meeting dates for the entire year allows all staff to know well beforehand when the meetings are happening.
- Rotating responsibilities: the monthly rotation of the chair, as well as the notetaker, among all staff is something that enhances empowerment, equity, and self-esteem. It also releases management from constant chairing, giving them a chance to participate rather than facilitate.
- One-on-one: at the end of the meeting, supervisors meet individually with each technician to address any additional issues and to arrange probable dates for supervisory visits. Generally, management meets informally every Monday morning, so feedback on any topic/problem is given to the technicians within days by their supervisors.
- Involving all: stakeholders (mainly from other directorates within MAWRD and operating in the region) are actively invited to attend these monthly meetings, strengthening ties between stakeholders and encouraging a multi-disciplinary approach.

Stakeholder cooperation (the more the merrier)

The contact and cooperation of technicians and other stakeholders are the main components of the FSRE approach, making sure that a holistic view of farming systems is taken (Embundile *et al.*, 2001). Technicians meet with stakeholders within MAWRD, other ministries, farmer organisations, business people, NGOs, and other members of civil society. Because technicians are in close contact with farmers they understand that there are other issues beyond farming which affect farmers. Although they cannot deal with these issues themselves, they feel responsible for helping 'their' farmers. Contact details for main stakeholders are compiled in a Subject Matter Specialist (SMS) list (Figure 5). What makes Ohangwena excel is not only the extraordinary effort

Figure 5: SMS list (adapted)

Region:		Constituency:	
ARDC:		AET:	
Subject	Organisation	Contact person	Phone/ Fax/Address
Animal health	Dept veterinary services	Dr. Amuthenya	
Cultivators	Private – Viva Cuca Shop	Mrs. Nembia	
Ploughing services	Private	Mr. Ambondo	

Figure 6: Events and activities calendar (adapted)

 REPUBLIC OF NAMIBIA MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE, WATER AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT	
Tel: (065) 263015 (065) 263098 Fax: (065) 263099 Email: extohsec@iway.na extohang@iway.na	
Department of Agriculture and Rural Development Directorate of Extension & Engineering Services North Central Division – Ohangwena Region Private Bag x 5556 Oshakati	
ANNUAL EXTENSION EVENTS	PERIOD
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluation of agricultural extension activities • Annual Assessment and Planning of Extension activities with farmer groups • V Ohangwena Agricultural Show • Annual Programme Review, Planning and Budgeting • Staff Performance Appraisal and Performance Needs Assessment • Pre-season training for extension staff • VI Ohangwena Seed Fair • World Food Day 	1–12 March 23–27 May 9 June 21– 23 June 24 June 5–9 September 6 October 16 October
ANNUAL EXTENSION TRAINING ACTIVITIES	PERIOD
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Farmer groups development • Farmer training on draught animal power technology • Crop production and diversification • Livestock production and range management • Natural resources conservation • Hide and skin technology • Agricultural marketing and linkage with private sector • Farmer exposure tours and farmer-to-farmer exchange visits • Cooperative group formation • Production of print and audio media 	Activities are undertaken continually throughout the year. Information about the period of implementation of any of the listed activities may be sought from the Chief Agricultural Extension Officer.
Our mission is in line with the national policy on agricultural development: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To provide agricultural extension services in the form of communication, advisory, and training services aimed at empowering farmers and promoting adoption of improved agricultural technologies and practices. • Commitment to provide quality services to our farmers through capacity-building for staff, information and experience sharing, as well as collaboration with all stakeholders in agricultural development in both the private and the public sectors within and outside Ohangwena Region. 	

made by some technicians to work with as many stakeholders as possible, but also the active role management plays in staying informed about what is happening in the region. As a result, looking at regional quarterly reports, Ohangwena links with three times more types of stakeholders than other regions (Loureiro, 2002).

Promotion of events and activities (show it off)

After the AW&B, an events and activities calendar is compiled, and distributed by the end of July. This is an inexpensive way of publicising the main events, activities, and services provided by DEES. Since this was started, all stakeholders and higher dignitaries know what activity is taking place when, and ad-hoc demands on staff time have been reduced. Since stakeholders have advance notice of activities, they also have the opportunity to organise collaboration.

Fairs, shows, and media

In Ohangwena region, management is very supportive of additional extension activities, such as shows and fairs.

- This is the only region that organises seed fairs and agricultural shows regionally and at constituency level. The seed fair enhances active linkages between farmers from all over the region, national researchers, and seed suppliers. It is held before the beginning of the rainy season, and seeds are shown, given, sold, and exchanged. The agricultural show is organised at the end of the cropping season by a rotating committee composed of one Chief

Technician, two technicians, and relevant stakeholders (e.g. cooperatives). At both these events, farmers compete for prizes (e.g. a cultivator, fertiliser, seeds). The 'best' technicians have more farmers winning prizes, and technicians compete among themselves to have the most farmers with prizes.

- It is one of the few regions with a technician in charge of mass media extension. The mass media technician assists in the creation of leaflets, pamphlets, posters, and newsletters. They are also in charge of interviewing the main agricultural actors for a national weekly radio programme, as well as telling listeners about DEES activities and farming calendars.
- It is the only region with nurseries at every agricultural centre, which have the dual purpose of being used for demonstration of new crops/varieties and technologies, and producing food for the technician's consumption.

Conclusion

NAES and governmental service providers overall tend to be seen as highly bureaucratic and inefficient organisations, with low levels of responsiveness towards their clients/citizens. DEES in Ohangwena shows us that governmental institutions can make innovations in their managerial style, making it more participatory, flexible, effective, and responsive. These, in its turn, have the potential to empower farmers and assist rural communities in sustaining their livelihoods. There are no copyrights on any of these innovations, please experiment, adapt, and improve them.

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