Engaging the Periphery: Farmer Facilitators as an Alternative Approach for Constructive Collaboration with Small Farmers in Trinidad, WI.

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Abstract

Public sector extension in developing countries is under financial pressure and facing concerns about accountability, efficiency, effectiveness (Riviera and Zijp, 2002) and its impact on small farmers, especially those at the periphery. There have been calls for reform. This paper responds to such calls, from a unique perspective. In an analysis of this issue the very notion of "extension" and the derived approaches, based on a source to recipient relationship, are reviewed. An alternative approach based on the concept of "engagement" is presented. Theoretical arguments and results from current research are used to explore how the concepts of "extension" and "engagement" are reflected in relationships with farmers and to evaluate a farmer-suggested approach of using "Farmer Facilitator(s)". Investigations were carried out in three peripheral farming communities in Trinidad, WI using qualitative research methods, including participatory fieldwork, focus group discussions and several PRA tools and techniques.

Results confirmed a high level of dissatisfaction with the present system of extension delivery in all three communities and zeal to forge a new approach in which farmers have more participation. Farmers indicated that the "Farmer–Facilitator" approach can provide unique opportunities for engagement not only with government agencies but also with NGO's, CBO's and the many other organizations that seem to place special emphasis on communities at the periphery. Community driven interventions in the areas of training, policy formation, and land acquisition were identified as opportunities for engagement. The research also identified several issues that needed to be resolved before such an approach could be utilized. These centered on the structure and placement of the facilitator within the community, the need for human capacity building, and financial sustainability. However, the approach is flexible enough to allow for adaptation to the context of a specific community.

The issues addressed in this paper have relevance for other developing countries struggling to fashion an extension delivery system that is contextually appropriate, cost effective and efficient. As such, the findings point to the urgent need for continued examination of the proposed approach.

Introduction

While numerous agricultural organizations have sought to assist farmers through implementation of various "extension" approaches, efforts to establish meaningful relationships have been hindered by the very conception of the relationship as "extension." The concept of "extension" implies a source and a recipient, a center and a periphery. The "periphery" is defined not only by physical separation, but also by socioeconomic and cultural divides. By failing to recognize that "remote" farming communities are their own centers, with numerous resources, extension agents have often perceived their work as welfare, leading to a reluctant and limited relationship. This situation is further exacerbated by the decline of government extension services due to shrinking budgets, the privatization of services, and a changing focus to deal with farmers with greater access to resources. The end result is that many agricultural organizations are out of touch with the farming community.

In 1999, the US's Land-Grant Institutions envisioned engagement as a way to become "more sympathetically and productively involved with communities." (Kellogg, 1999; p. 1). The search for an alternative approach is driven by the growing recognition that the days of government command and control over extension delivery are numbered (Riviera and Zijp, 2002). We believe that the concept of engagement is internationally relevant, and with some redefinition can serve as an alternative paradigm for dealing with small farmers in developing countries. We envision engagement as a committed, complimentary relationship between equal partners for their mutual benefit.

One such model of engagement involving "farmer facilitators" is proposed for Trinidad. Such facilitators would serve as focal points for coordinating community – organization relationships. Facilitators would be farmers who live in the community, thus providing an intimate knowledge of and involvement in local life. Farmer facilitators could fulfill a variety of coordination and communication functions, including requesting specific interventions, clearing and coordinating projects with organizations, building networks with other farmers, and facilitating collaborative research projects. Equity, respect, and collaboration would be guiding principles of this approach.

Purpose and Objectives

This paper employs both theoretical arguments and current research to explore how the concepts of "extension" and "engagement" are reflected in relationships with farmers. The objectives of the paper are to 1) discuss the concepts of extension and engagement 2) illustrate the implications of these using current research 3) propose an alternative "farmer-facilitator" model, 4) present farmers' feedback to this approach and 5) suggest practical ideas for engaging farmers and organizations in constructive collaboration.

Theoretical Base

Conceptualizing Extension vs. Engagement

In the quest to improve productivity, the state has often taken a keen interest in supporting farmers with information and resources (Swanson et al., 1997). Throughout history and across nations, a myriad of more or less formal systems have been employed in pursuit of this goal. The dichotomy between rural and urban communities has led to a perception that the "superior" resources and knowledge of the urban centers needed to be transferred to the remote and traditional farming communities. This concept was solidified in the late 1800s, when two British universities, Oxford and Cambridge, formally embarked on a program of "university extension" that provided lectures to the rural populace (Swanson et al., 1997). The designation of this relationship as "extension" quickly spread to other countries, and is now understood to mean any type of organizational outreach activities to less accessible communities.

In envisioning this relationship as "extension," however, severe limitations have been placed on the nature of that association. "Extension" necessitates a source and a recipient, leading to the designation of a "center" and a "periphery". Thus, the concept of extension inevitably leads to the creation of a periphery, in the minds of the centers, if not in reality. The "periphery" becomes associated with difference from the center, and thus is determined not only by physical separation, but also by socioeconomic and cultural divides (Swanson et al., 1997). Eventually the periphery becomes associated with dependency, ignoring the very real capabilities of these communities. A one-way, top-down approach to knowledge transfer is thus justified, as it is assumed that farmers have little of value to bring to the relationship. Moreover, by failing to recognize that "remote" farming communities are their own centers, with numerous resources, extension agents often perceive their work as welfare, leading to a reluctant and limited relationship. Farming communities have, in turn, grown disillusioned with the relationship, and increasingly function without reference to formal organizational systems (Swanson et al., 1997).

The limitations of the "extension" approach have led to the search for new models. The concept of "engagement" was proposed in 1999 by the U.S. Land-Grant Universities in response to their perception that "one challenge we face is growing public frustration with what is seen to be our unresponsiveness" (Kellogg, 1999; p. 9). Engagement was envisioned as "profoundly different" from extension in that it would be a system of "partnerships, two-way streets defined by mutual respect for what each brings to the table. Such partnerships are likely to be characterized by problems defined together, goals and agendas that are shared in common, definitions of success that are meaningful to both university and community and developed together, and some pooling or leveraging of university and public and private funds. The collaboration arising out of this process is likely to be mutually beneficial and to build the capacity and competence of all parties" (Kellogg, 1999; p. 1). The challenge to develop a more responsive system was taken up by the US's Cooperative Extension Service (CES). While maintaining that its "capacity…for grass roots engagement is unparalleled…" (ECOP, 2002; p. 2) the CES also admitted that it must "engage with communities and organizations through open, flexible, and expanded partnerships that share resources, respond to needs and expectations, and recognize and honor contributions" (ECOP, 2002; p. 6).

Engagement symbolizes a committed, complementary relationship; a forward-looking relationship that recognizes the contributions of both partners as equally important to building a mutually beneficial future. The Land-Grant Universities have defined seven "characteristics of engagement" important in the US context. Three are relevant to the redefinition of engagement in an international context, especially in developing countries.

1) *Responsiveness* demands that we ask, "are we listening to the communities? Do we provide space…for community discussions of the problem to be addressed? "Are we offering our services in the right way at the right time? (Kellogg, 1999; pp. 12, 47)
2) *Respect for partners* involves that we "ask ourselves if our institutions if our institutions genuinely respect the skills and capacities of our partners in collaborative projects.,, "Do we understand that we have as much to learn from our partners as they do from us?" ? (Kellogg, 1999; pp. 12, 47)
3) *Accessibility* asks us "Are members of the public able to negotiate our often-complex structures relatively easily?" Have we made a concentrated effort to increase community awareness of the resources and programs available from us that might be useful? ~~?~~ (Kellogg, 1999; pp. 12, 47)

Using these three characteristics as a guide, organizations with a mandate to serve peripheral farming communities should be able to develop relationships that reflect more of an engaged approach, by recognizing local people as important resources and full partners in realizing a shared vision.

Development of Farmer Facilitator Approach

The farmer facilitator model was first proposed in the search for practical ways to operationalize a more engaged relationship. During the course of numerous farmer interviews, it became clear that the current relationship was not optimally effective. In informal discussions about ways to improve the relationship, one farmer suggested the idea of an agricultural warden, based on his observations of "community wardens" in several other areas. For example, community members served to enforce government regulations in hunting and in sea-turtle protection. Both honorary game wardens and turtle wardens were provided a modicum of training and a small stipend or salary in return for helping to monitor and regulate activities in their local communities. Although neither warden-ship was, in practice, a perfect system, it still served as an example of local action on an issue of national importance.

This idea of an agricultural warden upon reflection seemed to offer the potential for overcoming some of the existing communication gaps, by locating more of the power in the local community. However, instead of merely serving to enact policies passed down by the government, the "warden" idea was further developed into a "farmer facilitator" who would be active in determining the nature and direction of relationships with outside organizations. In having a facilitator as the representative of the farmers, the model overcame the center – periphery divide, by ensuring that the farming community was recognized as both a source and a resource. Given the large number of agricultural organizations in Trinidad that were potential resources for farmers, it was envisioned that a significant function of the facilitator would be to help link farmers with appropriate organizational assistance and vice versa. This would overcome the present situation, in which the majority of farmers are not aware of the

myriad of organizations and resources available to them, and the organizations likewise have a very limited understanding of the farming communities. In this way it would be a demand-driven system, as the farming community would select from among the resources available to them. Organizations, likewise, would approach the facilitator when seeking to identify appropriate venues for their programs.

In elaborating the model, many other possible roles were discussed. Facilitators could serve as cultural interpreters, helping to ensure clear communication between the many different "realities" of Trinidad; Indo and Afro, rural and urban, thus ensuring socially appropriate initiatives. Facilitators could be responsible for ensuring equity of representation, so that the voices of all community members, regardless of ethnicity, religion, sex, or socioeconomic level were represented. Given the current level of technology, it was suggested that facilitators could be trained to operate internet systems, and, given a locally available computer, could assist farmers in accessing information and organizations through the internet. Facilitators could also assist with the development of community-based research.

In keeping with the spirit of participation and engagement, it was deemed critical to present a rough model of the system to local farmers, to get their assistance in determining whether such an approach would be workable.

Context in Trinidad

To evaluate the potential of the proposed approach, it is important to understand how agriculture is situated in Trinidad, and within these communities. As an oil and gas producer, the government of Trinidad has been able to ignore agriculture and, to a large degree, has officially marginalized it as an economic activity. In addition, frequent changes in government ministries have left farmers exposed to the whims of politics. Often any incipient progress is disrupted by a change in administration, leaving farmers to start over under a new policy. Any continuing commitment of time and resources to agriculture has been viewed mostly as a welfare activity, in recognition that a significant percentage of rural Trinidad still derives some portion of their livelihood from agriculture. However, in general little is expected of agriculture, and therefore little is invested in agriculture.

This has resulted in the Ministry of Agriculture functioning with limited funding for many years. The Extension Division of the Ministry has been operating under "critical staff shortages" for several years. Already stretched by a high farmer: officer ratio, Extension has been unable to provide all districts with officers. In one case, a whole county is without a district officer. Some years ago, Extension attempted to put officers in closer contact with farmers by "decentralizing" from one national system into two regionally administered systems. However, the frontline officers were largely unaffected, and the main difference has been in the administration, which has actually compounded communication difficulties.

While the Extension Division struggles to uphold their commitment to farmers, numerous other organizations, both national and international, have entered the arena. However, the Ministry tends to view these organizations as competitors for the same clientele instead of potential collaborators. Effective coordination has been hampered by a lack of communication, so that organizations are largely unaware of each other's programs. However, given access to these organizations, farmers have a large potential pool of resources.

The peripheral nature of farming communities in Trinidad is heightened by the low status of agriculture in general. In essence, agriculture is considered a peripheral industry. Any attention has largely focused on the flat, more accessible farms of central Trinidad. With increasing distance from Port of Spain and deteriorating roads, access to rural communities requires a significant time investment.. In the several mountainous areas of Trinidad, farming is typified by small estates of tree crops, cultivated manually and transported with some effort to an often distant market. Technologies that are appropriate for central Trinidad have little relevance here. Despite the relatively small size of the nation, there is still a large divide between urban and rural realities. While urban Trinidadians can easily access all the modern conveniences, rural Trinidadians are often without services such as pipe-borne water and residential telephones. In addition, ethnic and socio-cultural differences may create divides, as largely urban Afro-Trinidadians are often geographically separated from the more predominantly rural Indo-Trinidadians. However, the association of agriculture with Indo-Trinidadians has also confounded the seriousness with which Afro-Trinidadian farming communities are viewed.

Methods

After consultation with professionals in the Ministry of Agriculture and the University of the West Indies and field visits to potential sites, three "peripheral" communities in Trinidad, WI were selected for study. Field data gathered from in-depth, qualitative interviews done over one year as part of an ongoing research project were used to evaluate the current relationships between extension and these rural communities and consider the possibilities for engagement. Qualitative descriptions of farmers' and extension agents' perceptions of their relationship were used to illustrate how a peripheral mentality has limited effective communication. Focus group discussions in the selected "peripheral" communities were conducted to determine farmers' existing resource networks, their conceptions of engagement, and to evaluate the practicality of the farmer- facilitator model. Several PRA (Participatory Rural Appraisal) tools including drawing, mapping, ranking and storytelling were used to assess farmers' perceptions of current relations, identify community resources, and rank various alternatives. Extensive notes were takentaking and audio recordings done. wereThese were transcribed and processed soon after the sessions.

Results and Discussion

Relationships under the "extension" approach

Individual interviews and focus group discussions revealed that the current relationship between peripheral farming communities and agricultural organizations, under the existing "extension" approach, was limited by a lack of mutual understanding and communication. The results revealed that these communities were indeed "peripheral" in the eyes of many organizations, due to a combination of physical remoteness and socioeconomic and cultural differences. One community was deemed so peripheral that no agricultural organizations were active there. This led to an undervaluation of their contribution to national agriculture and therefore less priority for extension services. Interviews with farmers,

extension officers, and organizational directors all revealed a lack of communication channels.

In focus group sessions, farmers in all three communities expressed dissatisfaction with the nature of their relationship with agricultural organizations. One community was served by no district officer, and the farmers said that they had "no relationship at all" with agricultural organizations. They felt that "communication is broken" and "a relationship no longer exists." Any contact was "in passing, nothing of substance…paramount to insignificant." Another community, although visited by a diversity of environmental organizations, had only occasional contact with agricultural organizations. "They (extension) visit very few (farmers), like which few closer, but some people get left out." Other farmers supported that, saying, "they need to give most of the farmers in here closer attention, because sometimes they give certain farmers attention and they give smaller farmers bare attention." The third community had a local organization that was supposed to mediate between outside organizations and the farmers, however, farmers said that "we are not getting any (response) for the longest while now." Because of their proximity to a dynamic county office, farmers did say that "we get very good courses… a lot of good officers." However others expressed the sentiment that such farmers were "lucky" as others had no relationship with the extension office. The results of the organizational mapping exercise revealed that the Extension Division, as the main representative of the Ministry of Agriculture, was not one of the major players in the communities, but was still identified as a potential resource. It was perceived as being on the fringes of the community, without a lot of direct contact, leaving a lot of space available for future engagement.

Extension personnel expressed their reluctance to travel to such "remote" areas and their frustration at farmers' limited receptivity. One officer mentioned organizing a course ~~for 72~~for 72 people, only to have 1 farmer attend. When asked why they thought farmers weren't coming, one said that the farmers weren't interested because "they feel they know enough" and feel the officers "only have book knowledge." Another officer felt that limited adoption might be because the recommended technologies are too costly or labor – intensive; however, in addition he says, "farmers don't like to change." While the majority of officers expressed commitment to serving farmers, they seemed unable, under the current system, to effectively reach farmers with appropriate assistance.

Interviews with directors of various agricultural organizations likewise revealed limited understanding of these "peripheral" communities. In response to an inquiry about the lack of agricultural personnel in a particular region, one director said that there was no farming in that region, it was just "bush". However, a simple analysis would show that agriculture is an important source of income in that area and contributes significantly to national production. Other directors were aware of their limited contact with farming communities and admitted that one of their weakest points was their linkage to, and effective communication with, farming communities. Some organizations had decided to no longer attempt to reach farmers, maintaining that they were research and development organizations, not extension organizations. Apparently they "had been criticized in the past for their technology not reaching farmers, but it is not our fault." Several organizations justified their lack of farmer outreach because they relied on the Ministry as their vehicle for farmer contact. However conversations with some Ministry officials revealed this as a weak channel. One top-level Ministry official said that they have "no formal meetings with farmers' groups" in order to get feedback and listen to their concerns. He recognizes that the

few informal channels are insufficient and acknowledges, “extension has to develop mechanisms to interact with farmers.” However, he is not convinced of the government’s commitment to hearing from farmers, saying the “Ministry is quite satisfied with “always deciding what is best for the farming community” and has “little interest in getting farmer input.”

Potential for Engagement

Farmers are proactive: While the current relationship is being frustrated by a lack of organizational communication and a perception that farmers are non-responsive, research revealed that farmers, on their side, are still being proactive in trying to maintain communication. Observation and interviews revealed an array of resources available in each community, belying the “peripheral” and dependent nature of these communities. Farmers are not waiting on outside assistance, but are taking action on issues of importance to them, as evidenced by a number of individual initiatives and informal leaders. These provide potential focal points for constructive collaboration and support the formation of a more equitable relationship of “engagement” between farmers and organizations. *Farmers will take the initiative!*

Facilitating training: The perceived resistance of “traditional” farmers to change is belied by their evident hunger for information. Farmers repeatedly sacrificed time and resources to travel to courses and meetings. One female farmer, the sole supporter of herself, her daughter, and three grandchildren, said that she doesn’t have time to waste but will always make time for learning about agriculture, to the extent that she will rise in the pre-dawn hours to finish her other chores prior to attending the course. A month after presentation of a new technology at a training course, several farmers showed off their “adaptations” of the technology, using materials that were more readily available and less expensive. A farmer’s group that had linked with the county office for courses was planning to publicize this access as the primary attraction to new members. Incidents such as this repeatedly demonstrated farmers’ desire to access more information, and their willingness too commit time to such an effort. *Farmers facilitate their own training!*

Facilitating land acquisition: Issues of importance to the farming community have been acted on by farmers, who have been persistent in their efforts at communication. One community had established a farmers’ group many years before, in an effort to get action on a land access issue. Although the issue had now languished in the bureaucracy for more than 10 years, through several changes of administration, a core group of farmers were still doggedly pushing for action. One of the farmers, on his own initiative, had written the Prime Minister regarding their land issue. The matter had been forwarded to the Minister of Agriculture, who had personally promised to meet with the farmers. However, the mid-term change in Minister had necessitated a re-introduction of the matter. The researcher witnessed the farmer’s persistence, the incredible push of faith and determination, as he stood on the corner of his remote, rural community, punching the number of the Ministry into the payphone. He was polite, he was persistent, and he was finally put through to the secretary. She told him he would have to fax a new letter to the new Minister, to start the matter over

again. Within a week, the letter was written and faxed, and the farmer was again awaiting a meeting with the new Minister. *Farmers facilitate matters that are important to them!*

Facilitating policy change: While various mechanisms have been established to enable communication with the farming community, the organizations have often abandoned the effort, while farmers have continued to uphold their end of the bargain. In Trinidad, County Agricultural Consultative Committees (CACCs) were formed some years ago, as a vehicle for linking farmers with regional and national policy-makers. Each CACC was composed of elected representatives from local farmers' groups, and was intended to report on area concerns as well as providing feedback on policy. In the north, the CACCs eventually disintegrated, due to a combination of politics and farmer frustration. However, the CACCs in the south have continued to meet monthly, writing reports and submitting letters to the Ministry, although the Ministry seems, in large part, unaware that any CACCs still exist. At a meeting of national and international organizations, a Ministry official had referred to the failure of the defunct CACCs. At this point a farmer had arisen and corrected him, saying that he was a member of a very active CACC, much to the astonishment of most attendees. At a recent meeting of a southern CACC, farmers had duly made their reports, but expressed frustration at the lack of Ministry response. The PRO stated that "We are feeling rather peeved that we are not getting the courtesy of responses to our correspondences." However, he made assurance that "We are not sitting down and taking no for an answer," instead they are seeking an audience with the Prime Minister. *Farmers facilitate communication*!

Farmers have demonstrated their commitment and initiative in many arenas, agricultural and otherwise. In all communities interviewed, villagers described having vibrant relationships with religious organizations, making significant commitments of time towards maintaining that relationship. Villagers take advantage of training courses taught by a variety of other organizations, and participate in sports and cultural events. Villagers serve as community wardens in wildlife management and conservation. Farmers periodically organize to share labor or pool harvests. All these activities are the products of dynamic communities, of people who have long relied on themselves, and who have abilities that organizations should recognize and collaborate with, strength building upon strength.

Feedback on the Farmer- Facilitator Model

Because the "farmer-facilitator" approach comprised a distinct change from the previous extension approach, it was necessary to present the idea, in a broad form, to several similarly "peripheral" communities for their feedback. In each of the communities, the idea was discussed as part of a focus group. The concept of a farmer facilitator was presented through storytelling as a "rainmaker" who would mediate between the "river" (the farming community) and the clouds (the agricultural organizations). Comments and suggestions were then recorded. In general, farmers were supportive of the idea of a farmer facilitator, feeling that they would serve an important function. Farmers expressed both a desire for better relationships with organizations and a willingness to take the initiative. They believed that if they could document their own initiatives, agricultural organizations would be willing to work through those channels, and the community would then be willing to work through the facilitator. The common concerns that were expressed by all groups are summarized below.

Support from a community group: In all communities, the majority of farmers felt that a "rainmaker" would be a natural extension of existing groups, even if the current groups were dormant or not optimally functional. Therefore, in all cases there was an expressed belief that the existing groups should first be revived or strengthened. This was fueled by the recognition that "the government of Trinidad and Tobago recognizes groups seriously. And not only government, all types of groups, all kind of people, all kinds of governments throughout the world recognizes such powerful groups." In each community, the support group identified was different, but logical to their unique local history. In one community the dormant farmer's group was seen as the natural vehicle, just requiring "revival." In another community an existing Cooperative was mentioned as the group that "should" naturally play such a role, although it was recognized that some changes would be needed to make that group more responsive. The third community actually had a fairly dynamic village council that currently mediated for them, if somewhat slowly, with the Forestry Division. However, in each community there was also always a dissenter, who felt that a new group should be formed to support the facilitator, expressing the belief that the current groups were too "political," leading to issues of inclusion. Thus, the general belief seemed to be that a community group should support facilitators. However, in forming or strengthening such a group it was deemed important to ensure that the facilitator would be representative of and responsive to the broader community.

Shared facilitation: All communities expressed the belief that the facilitator should be more than one person, for a variety of reasons. One group said that an informal system of resource people who "come to the aid of farmers" already existed in the community. They felt that you would "just need to enhance that network" through training and support. Several groups felt that it "would be too tough for one person," noting that most farmers would be unwilling to take too much time away from their agricultural production, which is "what they love." It was felt that having more than one person would "increase their responsibility," because they would be accountable to the other facilitators. Thus farmers envisioned the facilitator as a system of resource people, each with distinct skills and responsibilities.

Training for a new role: The farmers supported training of a facilitator in basic agricultural sciences, envisioning the facilitator as a direct source of practical advice. They concurred with the suggestion that training in group dynamics, organizational management, and community relations might also be helpful, although the need was clearly not as evident to them. All the communities expressed some apprehension that the selected person might leave the community on completion of training. Two groups mentioned a specific initiative with which they had such an experience. "Sometimes when one person get educated so, he don't want to tell you nothing again, he take himself and gone. It happen here already" To prevent this, one group suggested having a trainer come into the community to teach the entire group.

Sustaining the approach: To assess the sustainability of the model, two groups were asked about possible funding arrangements. Both felt that some level of community funding was possible, especially for a part-time position. One community currently paid the people they had identified as resource people, and seemed to regard this as logical compensation. The other community suggested the idea of a fundraiser, however they admitted that they could not speak for the rest of the community. However, when pressed as to whether they themselves would be willing to pay, the farmer replied, "I would say yes to that, because (the facilitator) would be working for us…doing that for our benefit."

Facilitating information needs: Discussion of the possible roles that such a facilitator would play focused on information needs. All groups were enthusiastic about the facilitator serving as an information liaison, and mentioned internet access as a primary resource, especially in providing speedy response to their inquiries. Market information was also mentioned as a specific area where farmers needed help. "We want money for the peppers, we want it sold. Because the thing is we don't have anybody to say, this is the process. Because I just asked about NAMDEVCO (National Agri-marketing Development Corporation) and the export market, and that is news to many of us. Who is going to say, well there are people who buy peppers. Usually we are left to figure that out ourself." In another community, a woman who bought wholesale and sold retail at local markets complained that there was no way for her to find out prices, "You know you're going empty-handed, you don't know prices, so they'll tell you what to pay… that is a problem."

Facilitating knowledge sharing; Several groups also mentioned the importance of having a facilitator as a way for them to share knowledge among themselves. Although they admitted that farmers are often reluctant to share information, fearing competition, they acknowledged how beneficial it would be to know about each other's production. "Usually that is how we do farming here, everybody do their own thing…and nobody knows what (each other is doing). Look just the other day somebody came in needing a few tomato stems…to run a few experiments. I couldn't tell who had tomatoes. If we have a proper system, I could say, 'Well listen, a guy asking for tomatoes, I know you have tomatoes. So how can we have a system where we all know what each other have?"

Facilitating external linkages: They also recognized that a facilitator could help link them to outside resources and organizations. "Many of us, we don't share information because we… have a contrary perspective, that usually people ready to pull you down, so it is better to stay quiet…But you see that is why a group of some kind is important, because if people don't tell you~~, you~~, you would not know what is going on." "I am certain we don't know there are export markets for things like pumpkin …and pumpkin is something that grows just like that. But if we don't know that, we're going to plant one crop all the time. Somehow we need a system. We need something to make it rain, to change ideas, maybe we might need somebody to come in to help us change our ideas, our way of thinking."

Conclusion and Implications

In the context of small farm systems in developing countries, the very concept of "extension" puts up a barrier between farmers and those organizations that seek to work with them. This investigation showed that it is possible to break down such barriers. Farmers at the "periphery" can make an even greater contribution to national development if they are purposefully included in critical matters that affect their livelihood. Agricultural organizations, including national extension systems, need to recognize these communities as equal partners, and engage them in productive relationships. Dwindling resources have stymied governments attempts to provide sufficient extension staff to meet the needs of all farmers. Service providers that emerge from within the communities are viable alternatives. Therefore, the approach of using "farmer facilitator(s)", as recommended by farmers themselves, appears to have more potential than the existing approach. Better communication would result, as information would flow through channels determined by the community~~, thus~~, thus improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the entire system.

Worldwide there is growing recognition that farmers should be active participants in matters that are important to them (Chambers, 1997). The proposed approach provides a unique opportunity to meet that call. It would require that government and organizations formally recognize such facilitators and deal with them respectfully. Training of facilitators would be necessary in areas that traditional extension is not accustomed to providing. People-oriented skills such as leadership, group dynamics, mediation, and conflict resolution would be critical for the new generation of facilitators. Sensitivity to gender and issues of inclusion would be vital to ensure the equitable representation of diverse communities. For facilitators, some system of certification or accreditation would be helpful for quality control and credibility.

If such a system is to become a viable alternative for engaging farmers at the periphery, it will require testing in different contexts, allowing modifications to meet particular needs and situations. While the specifics of this approach are flexible, the key lies in re-visioning the relationship between farmers and organizations and actively involving all parties in shaping constructive collaborations.

Practical Importance

Wider Applicability: Trinidadian farmers are no more capable, committed, or resourceful than farmers elsewhere. Farmers, like other human beings, do what they have to do in order to survive and flourish. Therefore, the proposed approach has wide applicability with potential for engaging similar farming communities in other developing countries.

Increased Reach: A major problem of many organizations is insufficient staff to meet the need of all farmers. Farmer facilitators can meet this need by directly linking to many more farmers than traditional approaches that are driven by a center. Even if some payment is provided, it may still result in less cost.

Another option: Farmer Facilitators, as an alternative approach, provides another option for concerned governments and organizations. It compliments other approaches such as the privatization of extension initiatives and contracting for extension services. Options are always a more desirable scenario when faced with diversity.

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