



Case Study of the Decentralization of the Extension Services in Trinidad

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Type of reform

The case study could be best categorized as reform related to the decentralization and administration of the Extension Services that was part of overall reform of the Ministry of Food Production, Marine Exploitation, Forestry and the Environment (MPMEFE) in Trinidad. (Please see Annex at the back of the paper for brief background information on Trinidad). However, there was more to it than bringing the services closer to the farming community. It was also meant to strengthen the linkages among the various arms of the Ministry and provide a mechanism for delivering services in an integrated way to farmers and the public.

The reform was conceived as part of an overall effort to place the farmer as the focal point of the Ministry's services and therefore, it was associated with proposals for advisory committees, management councils and the like. The government and Minister of Food Production at the time placed strong emphasis on people's participation in development planning and this was a strong element in the approach. Perhaps for the first time it was so forcefully and explicitly incorporated in policy statements in agriculture.

The initiative for decentralization came from central government and not really from explicit demands from the public. Funding was provided through central government.

Brief description of the country context:

The background and rationale was first spelt out in the Ministry's 1988-92 National Agricultural Development Plan (NADP) and this document has continued to serve as the base or reference point for discussions about the reform effort.

The problem of coordination

The Ministry's structure was organized according to academic disciplines that did not correspond with the complex and multi-faceted nature of the problems with which it had to deal. According to the NADP, it emerged out of the colonial times and the thrust at that time was oriented towards agricultural production. Developmental issues i.e. people development and rural development were not a major concern.

At the time it was organized into 11 divisions. The Chief Technical Officer (CTO) directly coordinated seven divisions—ECIAF (a school for pre-service training technical staff for forestry and agriculture etc.), Extension, Agricultural Services, Research, Veterinary Services, Agricultural Engineering and Development, and the Project Implementation Unit. The CTO reported directly to one of two Permanent Secretaries (PS)--the PS responsible for Food Production. The other PS was in charge of Marine Exploitation, Forestry and the Environment.

The Plan noted that there was no institutional mechanism for horizontal interaction and integration except at the level of the CTO and PS. Thus, when problems arose that required a multi-disciplinary approach, *ad hoc* committees were set up. Such committees were generally beset with problems and often did not work out too well.

The plan also tried to deal with the need to facilitate communication among the Ministry and other sectors in rural areas so that all the necessary agencies could be co-opted in a broad rural development thrust.

Over-centralization

Except for Extension, most of the other divisions operated out of the “head office” in the capital city, Port of Spain, located in the north of Trinidad. To a lesser extent a few of the other divisions were also decentralized in that they had sub-units or branches at a regional and/or county levels. That location too, was some distance away from the main centres of agricultural activity in the southern and central areas of the island. Thus if farmers needed or wanted to go to a person with some authority, they would have to go the head office.

Although Extension was decentralized if a problem required significant input of other divisions, it would have to be dealt with at the head office. Basically, not enough authority was delegated to the regional and county offices. NADP also pointed out that the number of hierarchical levels between the Director and the frontline staff also slowed down communication so that at times, farmers do not receive a quick enough their problems.

Brief description of the reform measures

Basically, the reform involved setting up “mini-ministries” at the regional levels (North and South) and to some extent, the county levels. This required that those offices be staffed with persons from the various divisions and of course, an appropriate management structure. According to NADP, those offices should be capable of providing all services, which may be required by their clients.

However, decentralization at the county level has not been implemented. Although in some cases staff members from other divisions have been appointed at the county level where none existed before, the County Officer is not in charge of everyone. County Officers have the same rank as before i.e. Agricultural Officer I (AO I).

This structure was also supposed to facilitate grass roots planning. Thus NADP envisaged that comprehensive regional development programmes would constitute the major building blocks on which the national plan is based rather than the opposite.

The first set of measures put in place was the appointment of Regional Directors (RD) and Deputy Directors and setting up regional offices. The RDs were in charge of all units operating in each region. The divisions actually "decentralized" were: Land and Water Development; Agricultural Planning; Animal Production and Health; Land Administration; and Extension. Notably absent from the list was the Research Division presumably because the plan also made provisions for Subject Matter Specialists (discussed below).

The decentralized divisions also had core or central staff headed by a Director assisted by a Deputy Director, usually the incumbents. The core was responsible for: formulating policy and strategy; planning, monitoring and evaluating programmes; high level technical backstopping and so on. The regions and counties were basically responsible for execution of the policies.

A person of appropriate rank headed each unit at the regional level. In Extension's case the existing posts of Agricultural Officer II (AO II), one each for the north and south, were retained as head of the regional extension units. The AO II post does not require specialized qualifications in Extension and theoretically, can be filled by the most senior AO I from any area. The heads of the other regional units held higher ranks than AO II. The heads of units were supposed to be accountable to both the director of the core division (functional and professional accountability) and the regional directors (line and administrative).

In Extension the situation gravitated to the point where the AO IIs became accountable *only* to the Regional Director. The AO II supervises the County Officers (AO I) who in turn are only responsible for the extension field staff in the counties. Some of the staff from the other divisions working at the county level are equal to or higher in rank than the County Officer.

NADP proposed that boards of management would be set up to achieve coordination at various levels. At the Ministry level would be a board comprised of regional directors and core directors who would meet monthly. Boards would also be set up at regional and county levels whose members again comprised Ministry officials.

Added to those boards would be regional (RACC) and county coordinating committees (CACC) which would include farmer representatives together with the top officials from the various units in the county or region. These committees would act in a capacity similar to that exercised by a board of directors without necessarily having the statutory authority of such bodies.

NADP also proposed the establishment of 12 posts of Subject Matter Specialists including one for Home Economics and one for Farm Management, who would be based in the regions. To date, only two posts of SMSs exist--in entomology and livestock and they are located in the core unit.

As mentioned above, decentralization required the establishment of quite senior posts at the regional levels, which were filled by the most senior persons in the Ministry irrespective of their disciplinary expertise. NADP had suggested certain qualifications and requirements for these posts, which were heavily weighted to a farmer oriented type of person with broad agricultural experience. However, it is not clear what part these criteria played in the eventual appointments.

People with an extension background (either special qualifications and/or long field experience) are usually at a disadvantage in such situations since there are no specialist Extension posts and thus others in specialist disciplines can easily jump ahead. Thus it sometimes happened that people who had limited "field operations" experience ended up supervising a staff that was in the majority an extension field staff

This change most affected the extension service since it was the only division that had significant numbers of staff at the county and district levels. Whereas formerly they were ultimately responsible to the Director of Extension (DE), now they **also** were responsible to the Regional Directors. The DE was now only administratively responsible for the core staff of the division. In effect, it took the Director out of the picture in the day-to-day running of the field programmes.

The Impact of the Reform

On the Operations of Extension/The Ministry

Despite attempts to put the system of dual reporting into effect problems became evident just a few years after the "reform". Consequently, the Permanent Secretary issued a circular in 1992 seeking to elaborate on the interface between the core Extension division and Extension in the Regions. Basically it sought to define separate but complementary roles for each one within the broad framework already discussed above.

The directives stated that the Core division "has responsibility for the technical content of extension programmes and the methodology of technology transfer." The Regional divisions have "the

responsibility for identifying the farming communities, the timing and the scope of the extension programmes."

The circular also provided guidelines for the management of extension personnel that may have unwittingly helped to widen the rift between the two. It emphasized that the regional directors were directly responsible for all extension staff in the region including the AO II (Extension). But decisions relating to the overall management and performance management of the AO IIs must be collaborative involving inputs from the director of the core division.

The AO II was responsible for the implementation of extension programmes at the regional levels and it was thought coordination would be achieved through joint management of that person. As should have been anticipated (although some feel that it could still work) this did not prove to be a practicable arrangement and the two arms drifted further and further apart. As time went on the core sought to develop its own programmes as distinct from the regional programmes. As it stands now, there is little collaboration even in such areas as the core providing in-service training for frontline staff.

More recently external consultants have also tried to deal with the problem through the Agri-Sector Policy and Public Administration Reform Project of the Ministry. The consultant who conducted a needs assessment of the regions¹ felt that, except for Extension, and for those divisions that were decentralized, the regional structure appeared to work "fairly well." He further called for a review of the original plan with a view to re-affirming the directives or making revisions in light of the changed circumstances.

He mentioned however that there were conflicting views. The core staff felt decentralization was **not** working well while the heads of units in the region except for Extension expressed the opposite view. Furthermore, "the perception exists in the minds of many that the dual reporting is not working well." So it is obvious that the situation still leaves a lot to be desired more than 10 years after the reform.

Woods and his colleague Carpenter² who conducted the needs assessment for Extension, pointed to the urgency of repairing the core-region-county interface. The proposed major strategy is to upgrade the positions in the core to Subject Matter Specialists; however, a lot of work would still be needed to improve the relationships between the two arms.

This seems to be a fruitful direction to pursue. Since Research was not decentralized, the proposed SMSs would have been the key to improving the R \leftrightarrow E linkage. However, these posts did not materialize leaving the field staff to fall back on the pre-reform devices such as informal contacts with researchers etc. From the comments of the field staff as stated in the Woods report they expressed a strong need for applied research results so that there is no doubt SMSs would help.

Carpenter also recommended that the regional divisions and the Extension core should jointly administer the field staff and that there should be close and regular reporting between ETID (the core) Director and the two Regional Directors. Others have also expressed the view that if the respective divisions stick to the letter of the law as laid out in the various documents, then the arrangement might work. However, given the long history of problems, this is unlikely and it might again be courting difficulty if that route is pursued again. Carpenter himself has stated, "*there has been a history of controversy regarding the administration of decentralized extension services and attempts to make the system work.*"

¹ Woods, F. (2000) **Region North and Region South Divisions Needs Assessment** The Texas A&M University, International Trade and Development Series, ITDS-TASRP Assessment Report 00.00-7.13

² Carpenter, Z.L. (2000) **Agricultural Extension Division Needs Assessment**, The Texas A&M University, International Trade and Development Series, ITDS-TASRP Assessment Report 00.99-2.5.

One of the main intended outcomes of the reform was to change the way national plans were developed that is, planning should proceed from bottom-up rather than top down. The national plans were to be based on comprehensive integrated development programmes generated at the county and regional levels. These were predicated on the following assumptions:

- ❑ The counties would be structured to operate as fairly autonomous entities. This has not been put into practice.
- ❑ Enough planning staff would be based at the regions to help drive the process. However, the Woods report concluded the number and quality of planning staff were inadequate to support this step.
- ❑ There would be fully functional regional and county agricultural coordinating committees. Early in the reform, the Ministry put a fair amount of effort in developing and supporting these committees. They have not really gelled into effective organizations and do not have the type of influence that would drive decentralized planning.

On a more positive note, it appears that most people if not everyone in the Ministry seemed to have bought into the concept of integrated or multi-disciplinary approach. Everyone seemed to regard the intent of the plan as worthwhile although recognizing the difficulties in translating intents into effects. This is a good base on which to build once workable strategies are devised.

Secondly, Government has invested in more human resources for the Ministry. More senior-level positions were created and more staff were recruited from other divisions at the regions and to a lesser extent, the counties. The Extension core was also "allowed" to build to a respectable size. So, one can say that better resources now exist for providing an improved service although some redeployment etc. might be required.

On the Clientele

The "acid test" of any reform must be, to what extent farmers were better served than before? There did not seem to be any significant **direct** response to decentralization itself. To put it bluntly, there did not seem to be any more or less complaints than before. There seemed to be some benefits as follows:

- ❑ In infrastructural and other services provided to farming communities. Some time after the reform the Ministry embarked on projects (some externally funded) to improve access roads, drainage etc. It helped to have engineering staff deployed in the regions and to be able to draw on the extension field staff to assist (although this also had a negative side as discussed in the next section)
- ❑ They could have some of their needs/problems (probably more in the nature of services) attended to at the regions instead of the main headquarters in Port-of-Spain.
- ❑ It probably helped in the large-scale integrated response to dealing with the outbreak of the Hibiscus Mealybug, a pest that was a serious threat to the nation's agriculture a few years ago. The Ministry's handling of the situation together with other agencies was widely commended.
- ❑ The farmer coordinating committees show the way for formal farmer participation in agricultural policy setting. However, this could backfire if they are not quickly revitalized.

On the negative side, Extension programming at the field level were set back. Field staff were now more in a "response" mode (see discussion below) and thus, long-term developmental "educational" programmes that would help farmers meet the new global challenges were put on the backburner.

On Extension Delivery

Field/Regional Level

In the field, staff were pulled by regional management to carry out all kinds of duties. Woods listed these as: collect data; conduct surveys; certify farmers eligibility for incentives programs; and other activities unrelated to the conduct of extension programs. He also reported that to the extension worker, it seemed that the Ministry's headquarters did not understand and appreciate the educational role of Extension. Thus, although called "extension staff", they operated as field staff for the Ministry.

It is true, however, that attempts were made from time to time to deal with this problem by having special staff handle educational activities but were really viewed as temporary measures and this would not encourage a long-term perspective. In effect therefore, extension activities tended to be shunted aside in favour of the more urgent mundane problems that had to be dealt with. This probably had to do in part with the fact that the AO II who was supposed to be the head of unit is much lower in rank than the directors and also other heads of units.

Core level

As a result of problem of collaboration with the regions, the core unit tried to carve out its own niche without "treading on the corns" of the regions. Carpenter felt they duplicated some of the functions of the field staff but the core actually tried to fit into those areas that were not currently handled by the field staff.

The core absorbed what was previously the Information and Training Unit, which: produced, print and audio-visual packages; conducted training courses at the Farmer Training Centre; and provided some in-service training for field staff. Over time the core considerably expanded the range and frequency of courses; the courses were also offered at sub-centres in several parts of the island and to groups as requested.

These courses are available free to the public and are widely advertised. Participants come from a wide background--youth, beginning farmers, home makers, and some practising farmers. The courses are generally well attended and there is no doubt that it meets a need although the feeling is that enough farmers attend. So, in fact, this arrangement has resulted in some sort of a demand-driven training and is quite a valid use of Extension's resources.

The core staff (excluding the Director and Deputy Director) now consists of about 16 persons nearly all of whom have Masters degrees including a few with postgraduate degrees in Extension. Only two of the core staff are at the rank of SMS. However, the other have taken up various specializations including Farm Management and Social/Gender Issues and serve as resource persons when the need arises.

The core staff represents a considerable resource whose services can be harnessed to assist the field level staff, most of whom do not have first degrees. In the circumstances it would seem that the recommendation to upgrade some of the posts to SMS (including specialist in Extension areas) is the best solution. The problems of how to bring core management and regional management still remains but should be easier when the duties are more clearly defined.

The creation of posts of Extension Specialists would also help to deal with long standing issues mentioned by the consultants such as lack of career structure for extension staff and the need for timely extension training for the field staff. At the field level, the posts of County Officers should be upgraded and filled with extension type persons (long field experience at that level and/or graduate qualifications in Extension). This will help to put in place some of the provisions of the original plan.

Sustainability and Replicability of the Reform Measures

The reform called for additional senior level staff and we have proposed that certain posts be upgraded to improve the situation. Thus, it is sustainable to the extent that the public purse can afford it. It was not really conceived as a separate project that would make heavy demands for additional funds. If the projected benefits are realized (i.e. comprehensive integrated development programmes), then it will be well worth the effort.

Given the renewed drive to rural development and participatory approaches, many countries may want to replicate this type of effort in one form or the other. Some version of this "model" can be replicated with due attention given to lessons learned.

Lessons Learned

The first thing that strikes us is the old saying that what looks good on paper does not necessarily work out in practice. Although it was well intentioned and most agreed that the objectives were worthwhile, difficulties arose in putting some of the most important provisions in practice.

Rondinelli¹ in reviewing the experiences of some Asian countries in decentralization, emphasized the importance of clarity, conciseness and simplicity of the structure and procedures created. Ambiguities in design and organization lead to confusion and frustration. This appeared to be the case with the proposed system of dual reporting and delineation of the functions of the core vs the regions.

The proposed system runs counter to the conventional structure with clear lines of authority running from the Director to the field staff. There was no precedent or any experience with this approach anywhere else in government organizations, so it was quite a bold initiative for a public service department. The 1998 Wijetunga Report cited by Woods perhaps gave the most appropriate perspective on the reform; it was really "an experiment in decentralization."

It seemed though that the framers of the reform plan did not feel that the proposal would present too many problems. They most likely did not see it as an experiment or else they would have approached it differently since in the public service, it is difficult to change established structures. After the regional structure was established, it became a fait accompli and subsequent recommendations to improve the situation has to work around what has been put in place.

¹ Rondinelli, D. A. (1987) "Administrative Decentralization of Agricultural and Rural Development Programs in Asia: A Comparative Analysis", in **Agricultural Extension Worldwide: Issues, Priorities, and Emerging Priorities**, W.M.Rivera & S.G. Schram (eds.), Croom Helm, New York

Sometimes things go wrong no matter how well one plans and it would have been a good idea to set up a committee to monitor the implementation of the reform. That way it would have picked up emerging problems early and present opportunities for adjusting the plan.

The plan seemed quite ambitious, in setting out to achieve a bottom-up planning approach using coordinating committees and other mechanisms with which the Ministry had little experience. Certain other elements of the reform which many people feel were critical to the overall success, have not yet been implemented e.g. appointing SMSs and upgrading the County Offices to mini-ministries.

The amount of effort, goodwill and commitment needed to make the reform measures work was probably underestimated. Rondinelli gave several examples of how "people factors" (behavioural, attitudinal, cultural) can influence the outcome and these sometimes are not given enough attention. There was not any evidence of clearly defined strategies to deal with any apprehensions etc. that people may have about how it would affect them.

Guidelines for others interested to replicate the reform

In spite of the difficulties, we hope that others would not be discouraged from attempting some sort of reform. Some clear benefits have emerged and the Ministry is certainly better informed now about how it should continue to improve the system.

Below we briefly give some advice/guidelines for others who might want to go a similar route. This basically follows directly from the above section on lessons learned.

- ❑ Be realistic on what can be achieved given the overall situation (human, financial resources, political and other people factors etc). Identify critical success factors and ensure that these could be put in place before the reform goes full scale.
- ❑ Set up a pilot project or have some sort of trial phase to test it out especially if you are working with new systems, procedures etc.
- ❑ Build in flexibility that will allow some changes afterwards.
- ❑ Provide a mechanism for constant monitoring and support to ensure that the effort does not stall. Ensure that high level support and enthusiasm for the reform continues.
- ❑ Set up points for review starting early in the life of implementation of the reform.
- ❑ If Extension reform is part of a wider reform, ensure that it is not marginalized in the reform process.
- ❑ Stick to well tested organizational design principles especially simplicity and clarity. Be careful that in trying to solve one problem you do not end up with a larger one.
- ❑ Get the stakeholders involved and committed at all times. The way the change is managed can go a long way in getting people to make compromises to come together to move the organization forward especially if they see the changes as worthwhile. One must, therefore, try to anticipate where problems are likely to occur and devise strategies to generate support for the reforms.

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Annex

Background Information on Trinidad & Tobago

Trinidad & Tobago comprises two islands with Trinidad being by far the larger of the two. They have a combined land area of 5, 130 sq. km with Trinidad being 4, 825 sq. km. Over 95% of the population of 1.2 million live in Trinidad. The discussion in this paper relates largely to Trinidad: Tobago's affairs are administered separately

For most of its history, the majority of the country's agricultural resources were devoted to export commodities--sugar, cocoa, coffee, citrus and cocoa¹. It was profitable and contributed significantly to the national economy. Over the past 30 years export agriculture has declined greatly and is now surpassed by domestic agriculture in its use of productive resources and value of output. The relative contribution of agriculture to GDP has declined from 5% in 1985 to 2.2% in 1999 although such figures tend to understate its total contribution. The economy is heavily based on energy and energy based industries and the country enjoys a relatively good standard of living. However, significant pockets of poverty still exist and poverty alleviation programmes are still very much a priority of the government.

Despite its small contribution to GDP, Agriculture is still regarded as important to the national welfare. Roughly 10% of the labour force is employed in farming, fishing and forestry and many more are employed in activities linked to the sector. Agriculture has the potential to stimulate growth and employment in other sectors such as tourism and agro-industries. As the major economic activity in rural areas, agriculture plays an important role in the process of rural development although alternative sources of income generation are now being pursued. The country is also a net food importer; in 1999, the value of food imports was 181% of the value of food exports. Deservedly, there is a lot of concern about national food security and household food security.

¹ The information in this and the next paragraph is taken from, **Draft Sector Policy for Food Production and the Marine Resources: 2001 - 2005**.