

INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURES FOR PARTICIPATION, EMPOWERMENT AND OWNERSHIP IN AGRICULTURAL AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

In promoting development which is consistent with the widely accepted principles of helping towards self-help, self-determination, empowerment, etc. the question of institutional structures that can facilitate this, becomes relevant. With this in mind an organisational framework is proposed which provides for an institutional linkage between the rural community and the development agent(s).

Essential aspects of this organisational model are that the community or sub-communities (e.g. rural villages or farmers' associations) are represented in a single mouthpiece functioning as an overarching umbrella organisation taking responsibility for development, initiating and commissioning programs and development actions and co-ordinating them. Subordinate to the single co-ordinating body, are the various programme committees with a predominantly operational function. They are commissioned by the central council to plan and carry out, invariably with the assistance of a development agent, identified development priorities.

The implementation of this model, designed for both commercial and subsistence farming situations, requires adaptations to situation-specific circumstances, especially in terms of the compromise to be found between a practical ward size and the number of sub-communities that can be effectively consolidated into a cohesive community coinciding with it. Other aspects include the degree to which existing institutions can be used, the direction of institution building and the nature of community representation and participation.

1. INTRODUCTION

The shift in emphasis in extension from a technology transfer model to a more participative and facilitative approach, has, particularly where extension is focused on communities rather than on individuals, implications as far as institutional structures are concerned. Irrespective of whether this change is the result of a paradigm shift, or whether it is merely a return to the "help towards self-help" philosophy of extension applied in a community context, it calls for appropriate structures in order to be effective. In fact the underlying assumption of this paper is that participative development to the level of

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empowerment and ownership is not possible without appropriate institutional structures.

The purpose of this paper is to suggest a framework that can serve as linkage system in facilitating the interaction and partnerships between the various role players involved, and providing a basis for self-responsibility, self-determination and ownership on the part of the community. The nature and detail of such a framework will, in order to be functional and acceptable, have to be based on acceptable principles or assumptions. In fact, it is only against the background of such principles or assumptions that an assessment and constructive debate becomes feasible. In view of this some of the implied principles or premises will be discussed first before elaborating on the organisational model as such.

The model has been developed with the South African situation as background, but could find wider application, depending on the acceptability of the principles involved.

2. PRINCIPLES AND ASSUMPTIONS OF AN ORGANISATIONAL LINKAGE STRUCTURE

The principles and assumptions accepted as basis for the design and development of an institutional framework for extension are the following:

2.1 The institutional framework is an aid and no solution as such

It is common practice in the many organisations to restructure and reorganise from time to time, usually under a new management and the hopeful assumption that a new leaf can be turned over and that everything that went wrong can be blamed on previous structures. This loses sight of the fact that the institutional structure is only one of a multitude of factors that can influence the effectiveness of an extension service. It is in fact only a framework that allows, but does not ensure, proper participation and functioning.

With everything in place, but with lacking "heart" and commitment, development is unlikely to be successful. An outstanding symptom is the extensive corruption and self-enrichment prevailing in development in the third world. (Careless inefficiency might also be classified as a form of corruption!)

True commitment, on the other hand, is manifested in real service placing the interest of the community first. It will also find expression in the priority given

to the pursuit of the organisation's line function, viz. extension. This calls for a downward rather than upward support within the organisation i.e. rendering maximum support and service to the front-line extension workers, rather than subordinates providing a support service to management. Support to the front-line extensionist should also include technical support (a supportive service of subject matter specialists entrusted with the primary task of keeping extensionists abreast with the necessary and appropriate knowledge) and extension support (through provision of a supervisor or chief extensionist, well-trained in extension and providing support and guidance to the extensionists within a larger district or sub-region).

2.2 Linkage structures need to be located at the community level

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

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

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

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

within the community, of which external organisations become partners through their representatives. The PAM model, on the other hand, converges (like a convex lens) the interests of a large number of - mainly external - role players, with the community being only one of many partners.

Obviously there are also limitations regarding the lowest community or sub-community levels where a linkage and co-ordination structure is appropriate or affordable, but this is related to the following.

2.3 The appropriate institutional linkage level is a compromise between communities and manageable service areas

In situations where the service area, (e.g. an extension ward) and a community coincide (See Alternative A, Fig. 1), the linkage level is obvious and is there no need for a compromise. However where the service area includes more than one community (see Alternative B, Fig.1), a compromise needs to be found. In such cases the appropriate level for the linkage structure is that of the combined communities. For example, if an extension ward includes four villages or these

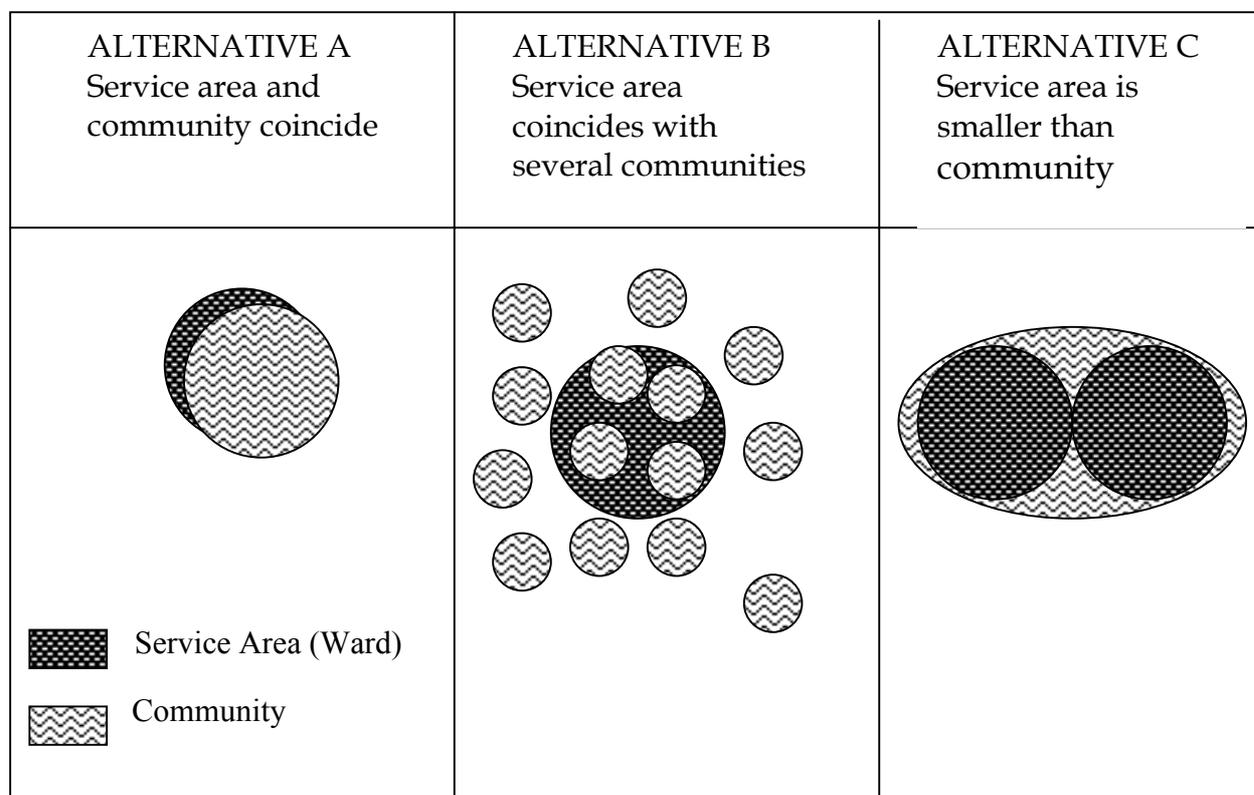


Figure 1: Alternative ways of synchronising service areas (extension wards) and communities

four communities should preferably be co-ordinated in one umbrella organisational structure for reasons discussed under par. 2.4. In this regard the proposed linkage model differs from Hagman, Chuma & Murwira's (1995) communities conceptual model for participatory approaches. They adjust the service area according to the community, which in this case would mean reducing the service area to fit the smallest community and then, if the capacity allows it, serving different communities independently of each other.

In cases where service areas are smaller than a community, and are thus served by more than one agent (see Alternative C, Fig.1), the larger community framework can be used. However, a linkage or co-ordination structure at a sub-community level coinciding with the service area (extension ward) is bound to function more effectively.

2.4 Communities, being the focus of development, should form the basis forward delineation

This principle is somewhat in contrast with historic approaches in South Africa, whereby the delineation of districts, sub-regions and regions was mainly based on physical or bio-climatic parameters. The practical assumption behind this suggested principle is that - putting it in very simple terms - it is easier to bring different messages to one community than it is to bring different communities to the same message. If this applies to promotional approaches, it applies all the more to participative and facilitative approaches, which strongly rely on interaction and on the fact that the community should accept ownership of and responsibility for development programmes.

In the commercial situation a community usually represents a cluster or collection of farmers' associations, preferably corresponding with the boundaries of a Farmers' Union. In the traditional communal situation the basic unit or sub-community is the village. When grouping different villages as sub-communities into a larger service community, tribal affiliation and geographical proximity are probably the most important criteria.

2.5 For proper development, a development agent is essential at the community or ward level

This principle which has fallen into disfavour in many African countries in recent years, will have to be re-introduced if extension in the form of effective facilitation and "animation" towards self-determination is to be pursued.

The necessity for a development initiator and co-ordinator may change over time. Usually, however, development is associated with increasing rather than decreasing needs, and the resulting development momentum invariably leads to an increase in the number of agents operative at community level, posing new challenges for effective co-ordination.

2.6 Working with communities requires a single mouthpiece per community that represents and acts on behalf of that community.

This principle must be viewed in the light of the already mentioned practical reality that it is difficult or impossible to serve two masters. Such a singular representative body constitutes a practical compromise in search of an effective link-up between the development institution and the local community in order to effectively team up as partners in the development process.

What is imperative in view of effective co-ordination, is that the service or operational areas of the various development organisations or departments correspond as far as possible. This is already part of the next important principle.

2.7 Development needs to be effectively co-ordinated

A problem presently facing many traditional communities is the chaotic confusion arising from unplanned and uncoordinated efforts of a large number of development agents and organisations anxious to become involved in development. This results in tremendous duplication and eventually a largely reduced development impact. Even in the commercial sector the increasing number of development activities and development agents has compounded the problem and all efforts to effectively address it, have met with little or no success. It is believed that this can only be done effectively through and under the direction of an empowered local community (Düvel, 1980). Effectively this means that development organisations become involved as agents serving under conditions agreed upon with the community.

2.8 The link-up of institutional structures with communities should be such that community structures are maintained and strengthened

This implies utilising and strengthening as far as possible the existing local community structures. Preconditions are, however, that the local institution's objectives are, or can be made sufficiently flexible to accommodate development objectives, and that there is no exclusivity concerning membership.

The logical carrier of the development responsibility is Organised Agriculture (viz. the South African Agricultural Union and the National African Farmers' Union), although its infra structure is not sufficiently developed in the subsistence farming areas, where village councils will have to be heavily relied upon.

The present implementation of the RDP (Reconstruction and Development Programme) in South Africa which is particularly aimed at the marginalised and resource-poor rural families, is characterised by a disregard of this principle of maintaining and supporting as far as possible local institutional structures. Instead new structures, often in conflict with existing institutions, are established in a top-down fashion, resulting in little true development.

3. THE LINKAGE MODEL OR FRAMEWORK

Against the background of the above principles an organisational model is suggested which is intended to serve as a framework at ward or community level and naturally needs to be adapted to fit the varying and often unique specific situations.

Basic to all institutional development of extension is the delimitation of wards or service areas along guidelines already mentioned. Usually a compromise has to be found between what is identifiable as a potentially cohesive and functional community and what is practical in terms of ward size. In practice this implies a grouping of several sub-communities like villages or farmers' associations into a larger community (cluster of sub-communities) that will function as a dynamic and cohesive unit. In cases where the community exceeds a practical ward size, the alternative of sharing a ward with another extensionist rather than subdividing it, should receive preference.

The linkage or ward structure suggested in Fig. 2 is in accordance with the already mentioned principles of empowerment and self-determination of communities.

Central to this linkage structure is the over-arching, central, co-ordinating body, representing and serving as mouthpiece of the community. It is characterised by the following:

- It should be representative of the whole community and especially of the various interest groups and local institutions. As an advisory rather than operative body, the size is inconsequential. What is of paramount

importance is that the community regards it as representing it and its interests.

- It accepts full responsibility for the development of its community as a whole. This can refer to development in general, or, if restricted to agriculture, a link-up with a more over-arching development body has to be found. It is through this body that the community assumes ownership of its own development and becomes empowered to take the major decisions in this regard, negotiate with development organisations and commission development projects.

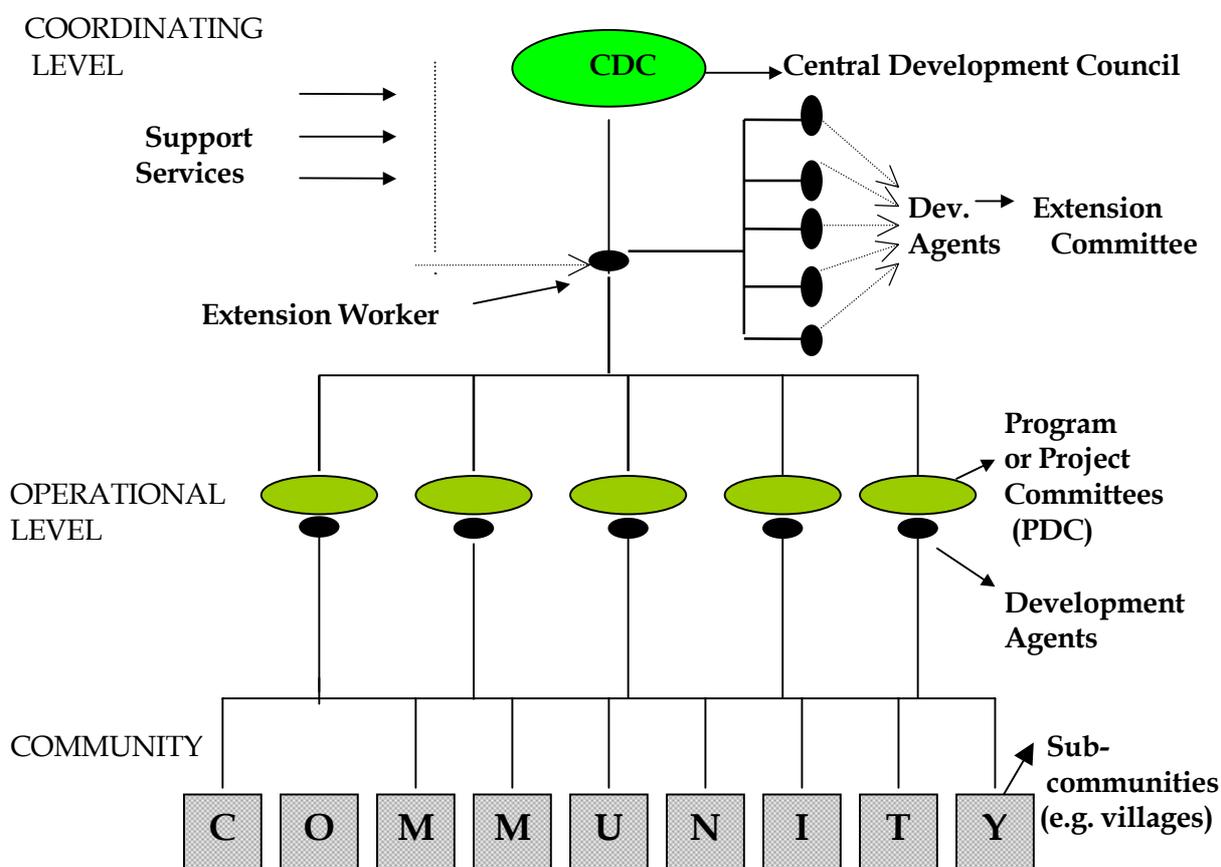


Figure 2: An institutional linkage structure for empowerment of communities and for facilitating partnerships with and between development organisations or agents

- Its main function is consequently to identify, initiate, negotiate, commission and co-ordinate all development priorities and actions (programmes).
- Development actions in the form of programmes are commissioned to nominated or co-opted members of the community who, with the help and

support of a development agent, accept responsibility for their execution and for regular report-back.

Initially at least, the extensionist or development worker, will function as a development manager or executive operating for and on behalf of the development council, and reporting back to it regularly. Together with programme development committees he (and similarly all other available development agents or organisations that are willing to become involved) will take responsibility for the planning and execution of development programmes, which have been identified and commissioned by the central development council. In this manner all development is co-ordinated under the direction and regulation of the community itself, i.e. its central development council.

In the commercial situation this council could coincide with a Farmers' Union (provided such a Union is prepared to accept wider development responsibilities) or consist of representatives from the various institutions such as farmers' associations, conservation committees, study groups, etc. In the traditional communal context, such a council would include representatives from villages and institutions within them as well as tribal and other community leaders.

The development council could restrict its activities and responsibilities to agriculture or, and this appears to be more appropriate in the traditional situation, accept wider development responsibilities.

The ward extensionist, with essential technical and other support from his organisation, performs a facilitative educational role with the development council and launches development programmes through and with the community's development or programme committees. Where several development agents are available or working in a community, the extension worker performing the co-ordinating, link-up role, can be replaced by a committee with revolving chairmanship (Düvel, 1985). It is important to observe that co-ordination with other development agents or organisations is not arranged directly but with and through the empowered community.

The institutional structure opens new possibilities regarding the accountability of agricultural extension and rural development. Public funds voted for extension and being in the interest of communities, need to be accounted for. In a manner this is done within departmental structures and ultimately in the form of a report before parliament. This, however does not involve the community as main stakeholder. It would be in the spirit of

empowerment and ownership if extension services were directly accountable to communities, and more specifically to the co-ordinating bodies (development councils) that represent them. Even more optimal would be a direct transfer of development funds to the communities, as indicated in Fig. 3.

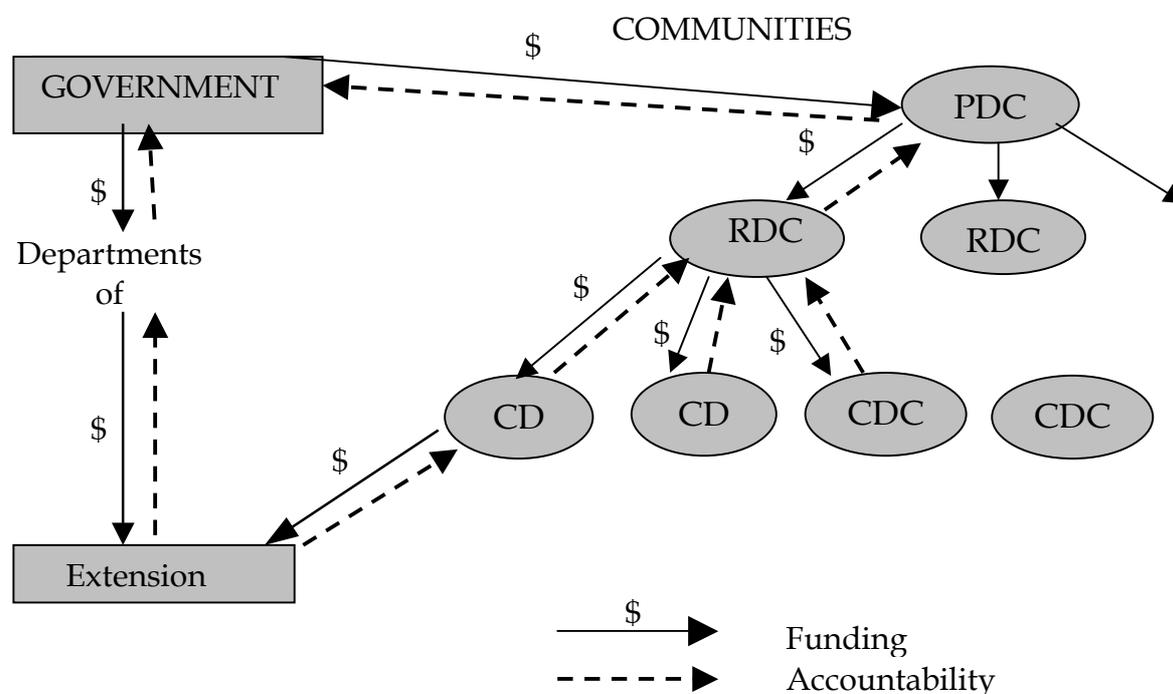


Figure 3: Diagrammatic illustration of funding and accountability alternatives

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