

SOME REALITIES OF EXTENSION MANAGEMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

The article gives a glimpse into the management efficiency of extension in parts of South Africa by providing empirical data based on the opinions and perceptions of extension personnel of different ranks. The findings confirm that it is a myth to believe that all is well with extension management in South Africa. Evidence confirms that there is cause for concern at all management levels, but particularly among the more senior management levels. There is general agreement about the importance of extension management improving extension and valuable proposals are made in this regard.

1. INTRODUCTION

The real efficiency situation of extension management in South Africa is not known, and the many viewpoints and opinions expressed in this regard must be seen as speculative, because of limited empirical data. However, the voices of concern about the status of extension management have been on the increase and among them are renowned specialists, like Bembridge (1996) and Norman, *et al* (1994) and Düvel (2000), whose judgements are likely to be unbiased because of their uninvolvement or external perspective. Most, if not all of these judgements relate to the public extension service, which is by far the most important extension organisation in South Africa.

It is, however, not only the assumed poor status of management that justifies the focus on extension management. An equally important consideration is the potential impact or multiplication effect that management has on the total extension output or performance. Good management holds the prospect of significantly improving extension delivery. Without it, and even with dedicated and efficient field personnel, this is unlikely.

What is the situation regarding the efficiency of extension management in South Africa? What is myth and what is reality? This paper tries to give a

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glimpse into the local situation, albeit only into the public extension service in two of the nine provinces.

Mail questionnaires were developed and, after testing, were distributed among extension personnel in two of the nine provinces of South Africa. For purposes of sensitivity and unnecessary exposure, these provinces will henceforth be referred to as Province A and Province B. The response in both provinces was similar, ultimately representing an approximately 10 percent sample in Province A and 15 percent in Province B.

2. THE EFFICIENCY OF EXTENSION MANAGEMENT

The overall efficiency of extension management in South Africa, as assessed by a sample of departmental officers of different ranks, is summarised in Figure 1.

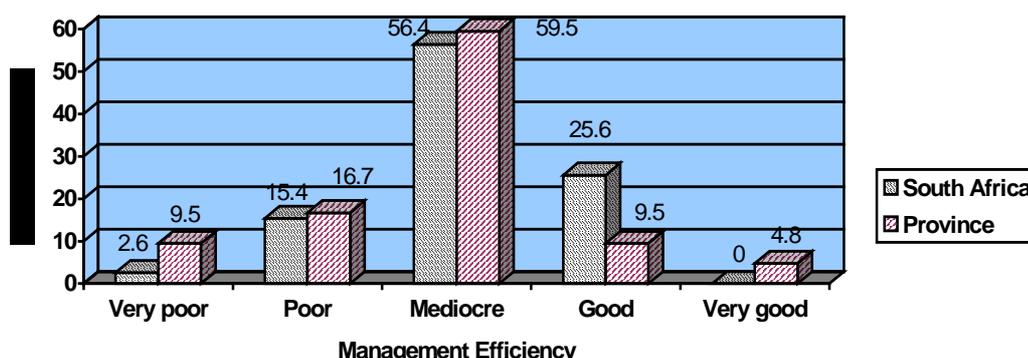


Figure 1: Respondents' assessment of the efficiency of extension management in South Africa and in their Provinces

The low assessment of extension management is a cause of serious concern. Less than 30 percent of the respondents rate the efficiency above mediocre. In fact the average weighted percentage allocated to management efficiency in South Africa is 51.3 percent. It is interesting to note that the management efficiency in respondents' own Province is rated lower, namely 45.8 percent. The fact that most respondents tend to rate managers in the whole of South Africa to be somewhat more efficient than in their own province with which they are acquainted, indicates that the latter assessment is probably the more valid one.

Provinces apparently differ in their management efficiency. This is shown in Figure 2, which compares the assessments of Province A and Province B.

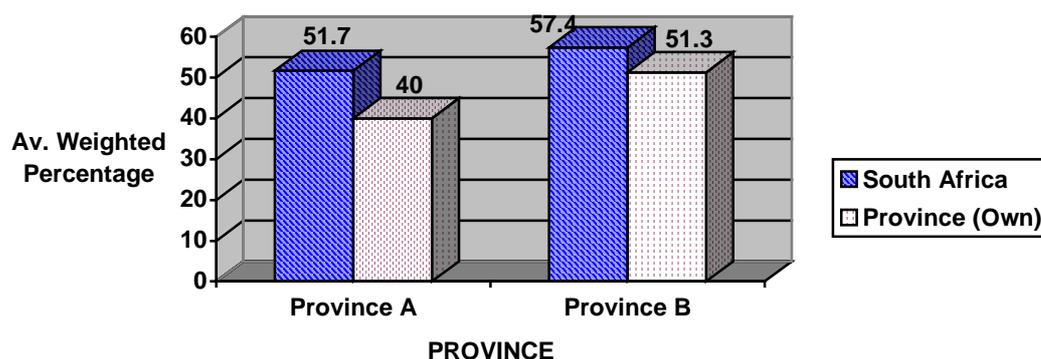


Figure 2: The assessment of extension management by respondents in two Provinces (Province A and Province B) of South Africa

In both provinces the local management efficiency is assessed lower than the countrywide efficiency, but as mentioned earlier, the assessment in the own provinces is probably the more valid figure. These findings clearly show that the management efficiency is perceived to be significantly worse in Province A (40%) than in Province B (51.3 %). The disillusionment of extension staff in Province A with their management appears to be manifested in the significant discrepancy in assessment between the management efficiency in South Africa in general as compared to that of their Province.

In an effort to establish whether the efficiency or inefficiency varies at the different management levels, respondents were asked to make independent assessments of senior managers (directors and higher rank managers), middle managers (deputy directors) and frontline or junior managers (assistant directors and supervisors.) These findings are summarised in Figure 3 and show how the perceived level of efficiency clearly decreases with a higher level of authority.

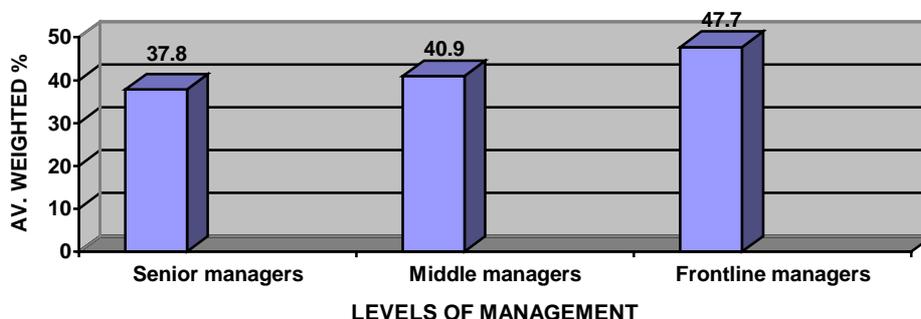


Figure 3: The assessed management efficiency, expressed as mean weighted percentage, of senior, middle and frontline managers

Frontline or junior managers (assistant directors and supervisors) are rated at an average weighted percentage of 47.7, compared to 40.9 percent for the middle managers and only 37.8 percent for senior managers. This is not good news since senior managers are regarded to be more critical in the organisation from an overall impact and multiplication point of view, and it is at this level where the biggest problems are perceived to be. These findings do not imply that frontline managers are better managers than the senior managers, but rather that the perceived short-fall of the latter in terms of what is perceived to be the optimum or ideal, is bigger.

Again it can be assumed that differences in management efficiency between the different provinces will also be reflected in the respondents' assessments (see Figure 4).

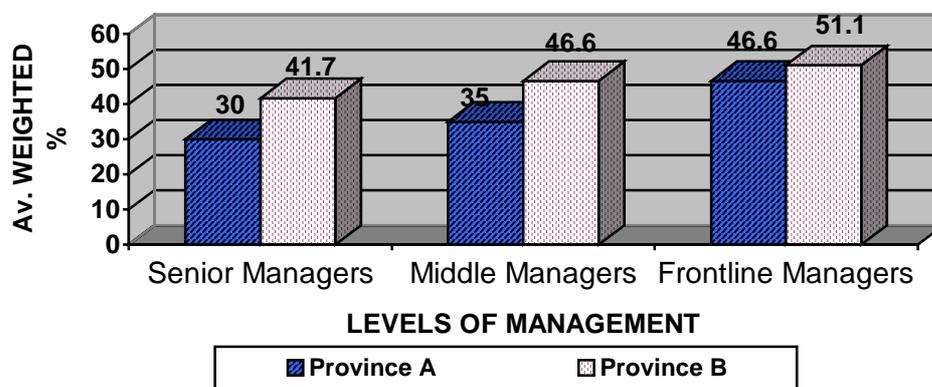


Figure 4: The management efficiency of senior, middle and frontline managers as assessed by respondents in two Provinces of South Africa

The mentioned linear relationship between manager level and the efficiency of management is observable in both Province A and Province B. However, in the Province A, the discrepancy in the assessment of the management efficiency is significantly bigger, further justifying the concern about especially the more senior managers.

The value or validity of these assessments may depend on who the assessors are, since it could be argued that lower-rank respondents (for example agricultural technicians or senior technicians) are less competent to judge the management efficiency of the senior managers than those who are in a higher rank. Figure 5 relates the assessments to the rank of the assessors.

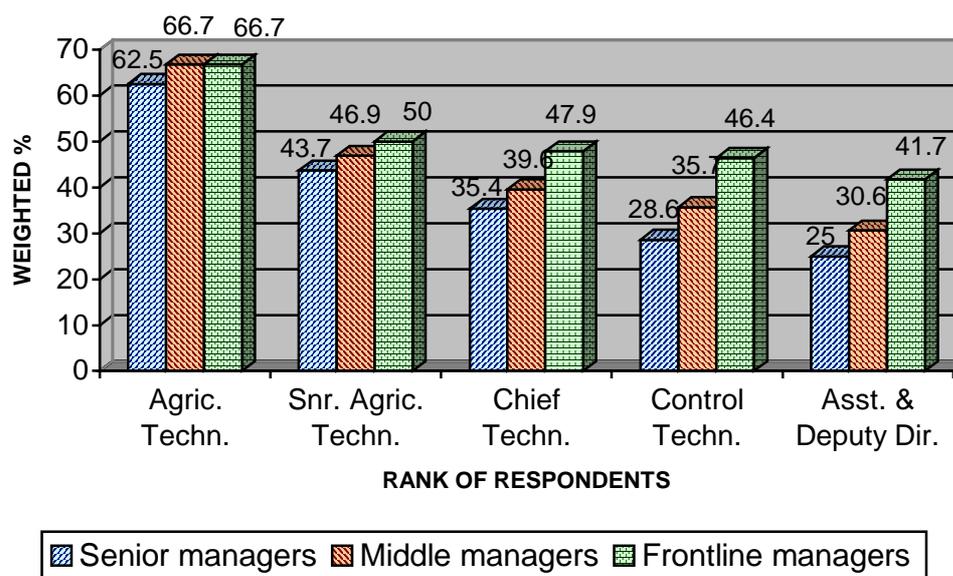


Figure 5: The management efficiency of senior, middle, and frontline managers as assessed by respondents in different ranks

These findings clearly show that the highest assessments tend to be awarded by the lower rank respondents, while the higher ranked respondents tend to be more critical and conservative in their assessments. This relationship finds expression in significant correlation coefficients summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: The relationship between assessments of management efficiency and the rank of the respondent

Assessment	Spearman's correlation (r)	Probability (p)
Senior managers	-0.40	.007
Middle managers	-0.46	.001
Frontline-managers	-0.28	.065

The highly significant negative correlation coefficients, especially in the case of middle and senior managers, indicate that the higher the rank of the respondents, the lower they tend to assess the management efficiency. It also appears, when observing the findings in Figure 5, that an increasing rank is associated with a bigger assessment discrepancy between the management efficiency of the different level of managers.

When considering the overall assessments regarding management efficiency, there is little reason to believe that the assessments are unrealistic. The

assessments of the officers with a higher rank and probably more insight and understanding, show that the general assessments are, if anything, too inflated. On the other hand, it does seem in hindsight that more accurate and reliable results could have been obtained if respondents had been requested to give even more specific assessments, like assessing their own manager(s) rather than those in the Province or the country in general.

Subsequent to an assessment of extension management in general, respondents were also requested to judge the different aspects of management like planning, organising, staffing and human resource management, leading and influencing, and controlling (Buford, Bedeian & Lindner, 1995). These findings are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: The mean percentage assessment of the different levels of managers in terms of the main management aspects

Management aspect	Sernior managers	Middle managers	Frontline managers
Planning	40.9	44.2	47.7
Organising	33.7	39.2	45.8
Staffing/Human Resource Management	30.8	36.9	40.1
Leading and Influencing	33.1	40.3	43.6
Controlling	30.7	37.7	45.9

The assessment variation between the different components of management is not all that big. Planning is clearly the strongest aspect, while staffing and human resource management causes the most concern.

In Figure 6 the comparison is made between the two provinces in terms of the assessed management aspects.

The already established patterns of higher level managers receiving lower assessments of managerial efficiency, and those in Province B receiving higher overall assessments, is again supported here. Some exceptions are here (Figure 6) the comparatively lower leadership assessment of frontline managers in Province B. Also as far as the leadership assessment among middle managers is concerned, there is no difference between the two provinces.

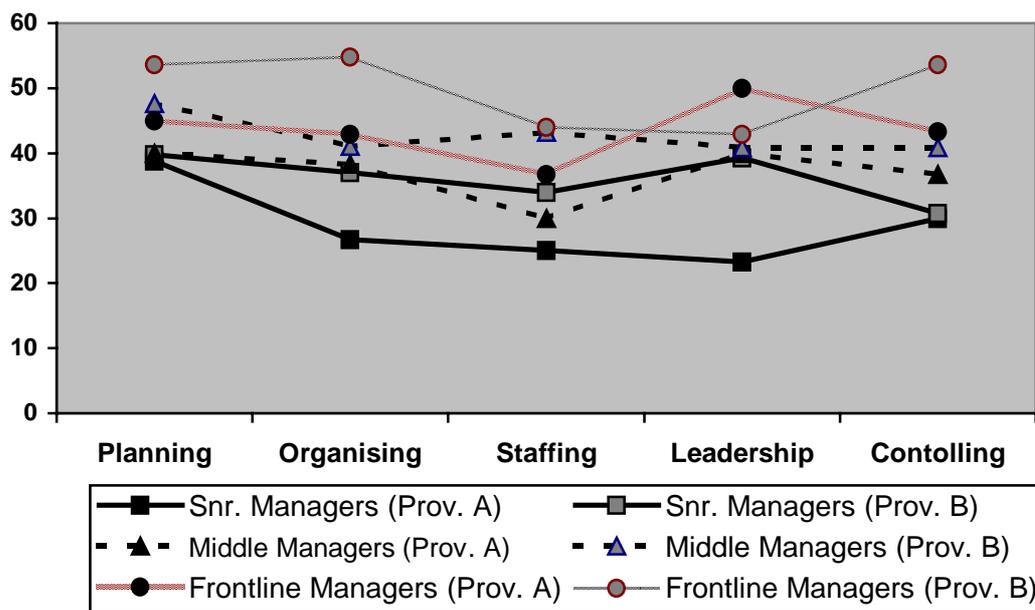


Figure 6: The comparative assessments of managers in Province A and Province B in terms of different management aspects

It must be assumed that a good knowledge and understanding of extension is a prerequisite if extension management is to contribute, through effective leadership, towards an improvement of the professional standard and general functional operation of Extension. An assessment of managers' knowledge of Extension is summarised in Figure 7.

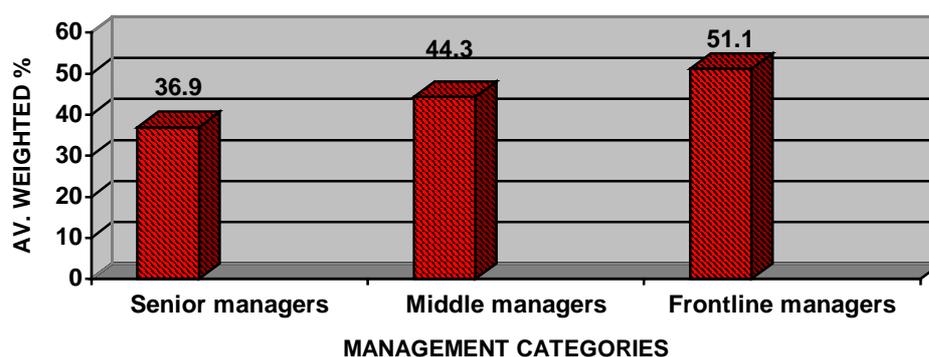


Figure 7: The extension knowledge of different categories of managers as assessed by respondents

The general indication is that managers are seriously lacking as far as extension knowledge and understanding is concerned. Frontline managers

are, according to the assessed levels of knowledge, seemingly insufficiently equipped to perform the critical functions of supervision and guidance. From higher managerial levels no support can be expected either, because with increasing rank or level of management, the extension competence seems to decrease. A possible explanation for the relative lower knowledge assessment of the more senior managers, could be their limited involvement in day to day extension activities, which would apply more particularly to the senior managers (directors and higher level).

An indication of the relative importance of extension management was obtained by requesting respondents' viewpoint regarding the potential contribution of different alternatives, including improved management, towards improving the current level of extension in South Africa. The alternative solutions had to be placed in rank order of potential contribution and the findings are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3: The contribution of different alternatives expressed in rankorder and as mean weighted percentage

Solution	Province A		Province B		Total	
	Rank order	Av. Weigh- ted %	Rank order	Av. Weigh- ted %	Rank order	Av. Weigh- ted %
Training	1 st	65.6	5 th	22.2	1 st	62.3
Improved Management	2 nd	57.1	4 th	46.3	2 nd	54.4
Better Staff Selection	2 nd	57.1	1 st	76.6	3 rd	47.0
Accountability	4 th	50.0	3 rd	49.6	4 th	41.1
More Financial Resources	5 th	44.4	2 nd	64.1	5 th	31.7

These findings seem to indicate that the importance of effective extension management is appreciated, at least among the respondents. Training is seen as the outstanding activity that can contribute most to the improvement of extension (weighted percentage mean of 62.3%), but improved management was awarded a clear second position (54.4%). Noteworthy is the relatively high position of "better staff selection", particularly because it is, compared to the first two, much more single dimensional in nature. Training and improved management include a wide variety of aspects and are thus perceived to have a much higher potential impact. Accountability is rated surprisingly low, but the lack of financial resources is clearly not as important as it is normally made out to be.

3. RECOMMENDED SOLUTIONS

In a final open-ended question respondents were challenged to make proposals for improving extension management in South Africa. The responses are summarised in Table 4. The number of respondents naming a certain solution does not reflect the general support that the measure has, but rather indicates the number of respondents that feel strong about a certain issue.

Table 4: Solutions for improving extension management in South Africa as proposed by respondents

SOLUTIONS		(N=44)
1.	Training in management, capacity building	8
2.	Training managers in extension, regular workshopping	13
3.	In-service training/attending extension conferences	7
4.	Accountability through regular monitoring and evaluation	10
5.	Proper personnel selection/no bias/only well qualified	9
6.	Train politicians in extension/force to toe the line/get rid of politicians	6
7.	Focus on extension and not other administrative or external tasks	4
8.	Establish a neutral Agricultural Extension Council	3
9.	Adaptation of institutional structures	3
10.	Farmer participation/ownership in planning and development	4
11.	Focus on willing farmers – also commercial/ignore equity	3
12.	Staff sensitive/emphasis on motivation/participatory management	5
13.	Decentralisation	3
14.	Professional registration of extension officers	2
15.	Improve support services	3
16.	Improve organisational communication (up and down)	3
17.	Enforce programmed extension	2
18.	Tread carefully with privatisation	1
19.	Give preference to client rather than Government needs	2

The outstanding issue that respondents feel very strongly about, is training. General training in management was regarded to be very important (8

nomination), but more important and critical (13 nominations) is the conviction that managers need to be specifically trained in extension, and that on an ongoing basis. In-service training and the need for regular exposure to the discipline of extension at conferences, symposia, etc. (7 nominations) is part of the same concern. This viewpoint holds that a neutral manager or one that has only been trained in the arts or skills of management, is not suited to meet the challenges in the practical extension situation. This may well represent one of the biggest current constraints in extension management in South Africa.

The result of incompetence or poor qualification is, amongst others, the probable reason why so many respondents (9) called for proper personnel selection, or for managers that are well trained, irrespective of colour, creed or gender. In fact, all these respondents specifically referred to the necessity of being absolutely unbiased, to ensure that the best candidates are selected or promoted to managers.

Politicians are widely accepted to present problems in the extension or development situation. Getting rid of them (as demanded by some) is not possible, but the alternative solution of training them, might also not be all that easy to implement. Perhaps a more workable solution lies in getting them involved and committed in the total process and thus also co-responsible and accountable for decisions taken.

An interesting proposal is that of a neutral or independent Agricultural Extension Council (3 nominations). Behind this proposal is perhaps the concern that politicians, but particularly government departments are in a sense "untouchable" because of only internal or selective external accountability. Other proposals regarding institutional structures (3 nominations) relate to the need to have extension nationally co-ordinated at the highest management level by a person truly competent in extension, and – somewhat opposite to that -- increased decentralisation (3 nominations). Under the institutional or structural proposals need was also expressed for a close supervisor at ward or grassroots level to ensure extension delivery in spite of low general extension competence among agricultural technicians.

A fair number (4 nominations) of respondents made special mention of the need to involve farmers in the development process, even to the degree of full ownership and co-responsibility. The motives behind these proposals could be a concern for increased effectiveness in development, but could also be the normative goal of "help towards self-help" as such. As far as the former is concerned, more drastic proposals were made like focusing only on willing

farmers (3 nominations), even if it means predominantly commercial farmers and has to occur at the cost of equity. Other proposals were to enforce programmed extension (3), to drastically improve the support services (3) and to give much more preference to clients rather than government needs.

A need has also been expressed (5 nominations) for improved human resource management with specific reference to staff sensitivity and participatory management. However, the fact that the large majority of the above issues are task-focused, is an indication that respondents have an appreciation of the tremendous challenges facing the public sector extension service.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The research findings, although not necessarily representative of the total South African extension situation, do indicate that it is a myth to believe that everything is well as far as extension management in the public sector is concerned. Provinces differ in this regard, but it is rather a matter of some provinces being still significantly worse off than others.

Accepting the seriousness of the situation would be the first important step towards improvement. Alternatively the tendency could be to reject the findings on the basis of suspected unreliability of the data. However, the fact that the higher rank and more informed respondents were the more critical and tended to give lower assessments, is an indication that the findings are, if anything, rather conservative. More extensive surveys need to be conducted and the validity and reliability of findings could be enhanced by more specific rather than general assessments. This could further increase the evaluative value of the data.

The improvement potential and corresponding impact is tremendous, and the paper makes numerous useful proposals in this regard. However exploiting this potential will only be possible with real commitment and a reconsideration of priorities.

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