

# AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION IN ZIMBABWE : THE BASIS FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Agricultural extension is at the very heart of rural development. The success or failure of many Third World rural development plans will be determined to a significant degree by the impact of the agricultural extension services as 'change agents'. The most important link in effecting improved agricultural practices and rural development is the Extension Worker (EW). Paradoxically, it is frequently the case that the EW is the most neglected and poorly supported member within the agricultural extension services. In many development plans the pivotal role of the EW is not appreciated. Far too often the EW's productivity is poor and the desired unity of purpose between the EW and the farmer is missing. Poor productivity may be attributed to a combination of factors including low pay, poor and inadequate supervision, limited back-up services, limited and inappropriate training, lack of transport and rural isolation. These factors can seriously undermine the effectiveness of a rural development plan particularly at the crucial micro-level.

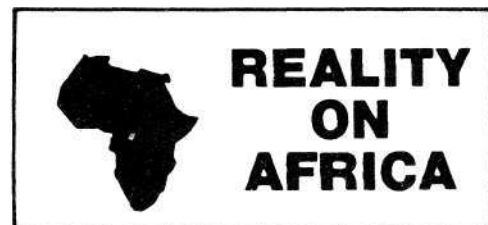
Why has this situation arisen? The answer is to be found in the way planners and government officials frequently view rural development. Far too often development planners have equated rural development with agricultural development. Success has been viewed in terms of introducing new high yielding crop varieties, improved livestock vaccines, building large scale irrigation schemes, etc. It has been assumed, falsely, that success in rural development can be achieved without the active involvement of the rural communities. In part this depends upon how success is measured. Agricultural development resulting in increased output (in the form of produce) but without the active participation of the rural homesteads is likely to result in increased dependence by the homesteads on agricultural technologists and could well accelerate rural-urban migration. To offset this tendency rural development projects or schemes should involve the rural population at all stages if optimum success is to be obtained. The ultimate goal of rural development should be to improve the standard of living (socio-economic status) of the rural population on a sustained basis. This means in turn that it is crucial to accurately determine the needs and wants of the rural population and thereafter to develop strategies which satisfy their needs and improve their well being. In other words successful rural development planning and implementation is the antithesis of centralised top-down project implementation.

## WHAT IS AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION?

The FAO (1962) defines agricultural extension as "an informal out-of-school educational service for training and influencing farmers (and their families) to adopt improved practices in crop and livestock production, management, conservation and marketing. Concern is not

only with teaching and securing adoption of a particular improved practice, but with changing the outlook of the farmer to the point where he will be receptive to, and on his own initiative, continuously seek means of improving his farm business and home".

The above definition embodies several important points. First of all, extension is an educational process, aimed at helping people to help themselves. It is neither a service agency nor a law enforcement agency. Its major function is to assist in developing people's understanding and ability to think through their own problems and solve them. That education has a lasting effect is implied in the definition when it states that the farmer will on his own initiative continuously seek to improve his farm business and home.



Secondly, the definition outlines the scope of extension activity. Extension is concerned not only with improvement of farm business, including crop and livestock production, management, conservation, and marketing, but also with improvement of the farm home. It takes the farm and the home as a unit, because they influence each other and cannot be separated. Farming over most parts of the world is more than a business. It is a way of life.

Lastly, extension deals with all members of the family, for unless all are approached, improvement cannot be great, and in many instances, cannot be sustained. Where the migrant labour system dominates, particular attention should be given to women as they are likely to be responsible for agricultural production.

## AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION IN ZIMBABWE

### a. Pre-independence Resumé

The importance of agricultural extension has long been appreciated in Zimbabwe and dates back to the 1920's (Reid, 1977). In general, the agricultural extension service which was divided along racial lines concentrated on providing an excellent service to white farmers whilst black subsistence farmers were poorly serviced. The advice offered to white farmers was comprehensive with the overall emphasis being directed at proper land management and in particular, conservation. 'Conex' operated in the white commercial land ownership areas whilst extension in the black communal land ownership areas, was provided by

'Devag'. It emphasized soil and vegetation conservation and in particular the construction of contours. Over a number of years a fairly comprehensive Master Farmer training scheme was established which enabled successful participants to qualify for a smallholding in the African purchase areas. Extension personnel also emphasized the destocking and dipping of livestock which together with the construction of contours became politicised issues prior to independence. Zanu and Zapu encouraged opposition to the construction of contours in particular on the grounds that they were a manifestation of white control in the rural areas. To this day extension personnel have difficulty convincing farmers that the construction of contours is acceptable.

#### **b. Post-Independence Situation**

Three fundamental changes to the agricultural extension services occurred after independence namely, the unification of Conex and Devag to form the Agricultural Technical and Extension Services (Agritex), the switch away from white (commercial) areas to black (communal) areas and the rapid Africanisation of the management personnel.

The formation of Agritex was in line with the government's stated objective to eliminate all racial discrimination. Whilst the integration has resulted in some logistic difficulties, numerous benefits have been obtained. Firstly, it has permitted the rationalization of the service and encouraged greater efficiency in the use of limited resources and manpower. Secondly, it has facilitated greater awareness and understanding of the huge gap between the commercial and communal sectors. Thirdly, it has resulted in improved co-ordination both between ministries and with Non Government Organisations (NGO's) involved in rural development.

The second major change was the switch away from the white sector to the black sector. Whilst Agritex is charged with providing a service to white farmers the latter are increasingly obtaining their advice from commercial concerns. Clearly, however, the greatest need for agricultural extension is in the communal areas and accordingly about eighty percent of the extension effort is directed there. The service provided by Agritex to the commercial farms is generally at a specialist level. Commercial farmers may obtain advice over the phone or by coming into town and obtaining advice from the Agritex specialist or alternatively the specialist may visit the farm for a day or two. Communal farmers obtain most of their information at rural meetings or from visits by the Agritex field staff who, in contrast to the specialists, usually live in the rural areas with their clients.

Africanisation has proceeded fairly smoothly and has been speeded up by the resignation of many experienced white professional staff after independence. Whilst a large proportion of the resignations were initially due to racial considerations, an increasing number may be attributed to dissatisfaction with the conditions of employment (salaries have fallen considerably in real terms and are much lower than those offered in the private sector). More and more black Zimbabweans have become disenchanted with their salaries and they too are leaving the public service so that, despite the rapid process of Africanisation, numerous middle and senior management level posts within Agritex are unfilled. The Africanisation process has resulted in rapid advancement for blacks but it has been at the expense of practical experience. Agritex is now in the position where

a large proportion of its management staff have less than five years experience and in many cases no field experience although they possess suitable academic qualifications. Given this situation, and despite a large training component within Agritex, the staff will require a further couple of years experience with a stable workforce before optimum efficiency will be achieved.

#### **THE STRUCTURE OF AGRITEX**

The broad structure is outlined in Figure 1. It is pertinent to note that Agritex comprises technical and field branches which may be attributed to the past merger between Conex (technical) and Devag (field). Integration of the two branches has been steady but slow and differences exist over how best to achieve this goal. At present the field section dominates and it is the duty of the technical section to provide the necessary expertise to upgrade and stimulate the former. For that reason I will concentrate upon the field structure only and examine the key posts therein.

##### **a. Provincial Agricultural Extension Officer (PAEO)**

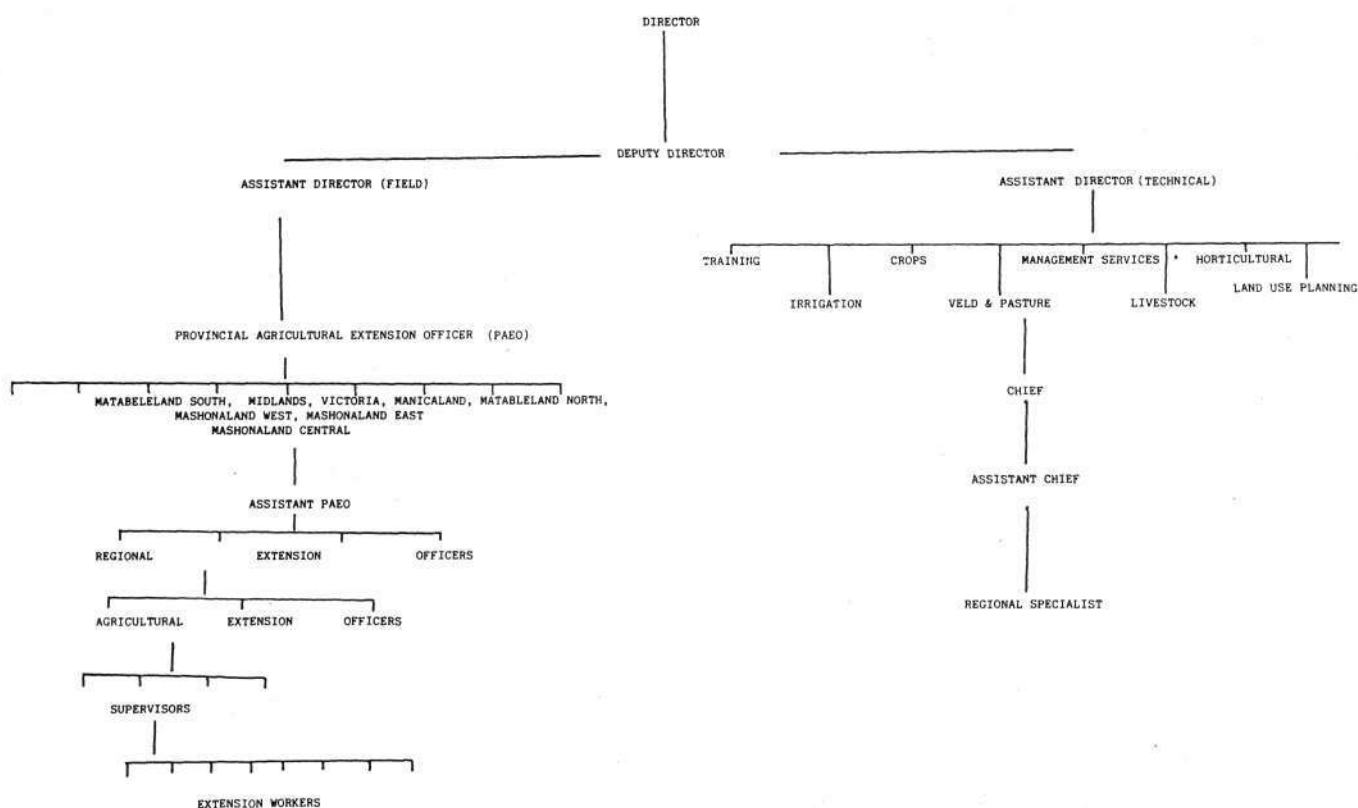
This is primarily an administrative position. The PAEO is responsible for ensuring that the department's objectives at a provincial level coincide and complement the national objectives. The eight PAEO's meet regularly and coordinate with the Directorate. At the provincial level the PAEO liaises with other ministerial heads and sits on the provincial project committees which are now headed by the provincial Governor. The PAEO is responsible for the well-being of all staff (including technical specialists) and is responsible for recommending promotions and transfers. His primary day to day responsibilities lie with the three or four regional officers (RAEO) who are usually based in the regional towns.

#### **THE REGIONAL AND AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION OFFICERS (REO AND AEO)**

It is the REO who assumes direct control over field staff at the regional level. The position requires a mix of field work and administration. The REO is responsible for defining the regional objectives and ensuring that they are met. Such objectives would be for example to improve the cattle off-take percentage, to improve the herd composition, to increase the number of farmer organisations, and to encourage proper tillage methods. There has been increasing pressure on the REO's to set achievable objectives within a specified period rather than to set vague non-measurable goals. The REO is responsible for calling in technical specialists when required and can commission research projects in his area. The position also requires the REO to attend inter-ministerial meetings with his equivalent counterparts and to work closely with NGO's engaged in development projects.

The AEO runs the area office and is responsible for the progress of the Agritex team consisting of Supervisors and Extension Workers at an area level. The officer is expected to spend a great part of the time in the field motivating staff. He is responsible for ensuring the success of the department objectives at an area level. An important function of both the REO and the AEO is staff training. The officers are expected to assist with the training of Supervisors and Extension Workers in liaison with the Training Specialist (Technical).

A large number of the AEO's have university degrees (frequently obtained from Eastern Europe and the



Soviet Union) and possess little field experience. All too often the AEO's see their position as a stepping stone to some more senior position and are simultaneously aiming to further their academic qualifications in an overseas country. The dissatisfaction of the AEO's with their posts may be attributed to three factors. Firstly, they receive low salaries. Secondly, many object to being placed 'in the bush' and seek the more sophisticated social life of the main towns. Thirdly, not all the AEO's are particularly interested in agricultural extension. Given the background of many of the AEO's this is not a surprising scenario. Part of the blame for this state of affairs rests with the criteria for promotions within Agritex whereby a university degree or agriculture diploma is a prerequisite for advancement to this (lowest level) management post.

### SUPERVISORS AND EXTENSION WORKERS (EW)

The Supervisors and EW's play a pivotal role in the department. Supervisors are always drawn from the pool of EW's and are senior men with a great deal of experience but usually with only limited formal education. They are usually responsible for a team of four to six EW's based in the field. They are expected to support the EW whenever he requires assistance and to act in a facilitating rather than a controlling manner. The supervisors should rotate amongst the various EW's and can replace the EW if he is on leave, sick or attending a training programme. A major worry of supervisors is the lack of real promotion prospects. Promotion to officer level is determined by whether the supervisor has the necessary minimum qualifications (an agricultural diploma or a degree). This is a sore point amongst supervisors who possess adequate experience but are unable to allocate time to further study. The Zimbabwe Government has retained for the most part the stringent requirements of the previous government governing promotion criteria.

The role of the EW is diverse. Ultimate success or failure of the extension service rests with the EW's performance in the field. This is a function of the following factors: (i) the knowledge he possesses and its relevance, (ii) the back-up services supporting him, (iii) his ability to engage in two way communication with the rural community, (iv) the appropriateness of the defined objectives, (v) the political climate. These factors are now examined in turn.

- (i) The knowledge possessed by the EW should be appropriate for the community within which he is expected to work. In Zimbabwe the courses devised for EW's have tended to over emphasize technical skills, which are appropriate for the commercial agricultural sector, and have under-valued the semi-technical skills required for rural development amongst subsistence orientated communities. In particular there has been a neglect of the dynamics of traditional farming systems. Most EW's are aware of this contradiction but feel that they are expected to recommend agricultural practices which in fact they know are unlikely to succeed or be adopted. This problem has recently been acknowledged by Agritex and the newly established Management Services branch incorporates a Research Unit charged with investigating traditional farming systems and the rural economy generally. The EW is obliged to attend a number of compulsory in-service training courses and may also be nominated to participate in other non-compulsory courses in which he has an interest. In sum Agritex provides considerable in-service training for the EW's but this training needs to be made more relevant.
- (ii) The EW is backed up by his supervisor and the AEO in the field. In terms of personnel he is well



supported and receives training and literature on a regular basis. The EW attends monthly meetings where he can meet other EW's. A Mobile Training Unit will visit his area for a couple of days at least once every other month showing educational films and videos. The main weakness in the back-up service rests with the poor record of Agritex in supplying the EW with the tools of his trade. EW's complain bitterly about the late arrival of crop packs, the lack of veterinary kits, measuring wheels, stationery, and teaching aids. The poor quality of their houses and offices (if they possess one) are another source of grievance as is the fact that EW's are forced to cover their large areas by bicycle. (The Government has plans to motorise the EW's by 1985). EW's are tired of being promised goods which invariably arrive late, if at all, and are of substandard quality. The provision of adequate materials for the EW is essential if his morale is to remain high.

- (iii) The necessity for the EW to engage in a two-way communication with the rural community cannot be over stressed. EW's who adopt a superior, patronising attitude are bound to fail. The EW will command respect if he involves the community, listens to their wants and needs and thereafter develops extension programmes in consultation with them. It follows therefore that the EW should reside within the community and should be an integral part of that community. Agritex has begun to acknowledge that the importance of two-way communication should be extended within the department and that EW's and Supervisors should be encouraged to provide feedback from the field. Appropriate channels are being developed to permit what is frequently very useful and relevant information from the EW to filter upwards to the REO, PAEO and ultimately to the Directorate.
- (iv) The setting of appropriate objectives can only be undertaken once an accurate data base relating to the specific rural economy has been compiled. Objectives should be divided into short and long-term objectives and must be realistic and achievable. The tendency has been for management and field workers to submit grandiose, non-achievable objectives primarily because they believed this would please their superiors. A secondary reason is that an element of rivalry exists between field staff who wish to be seen as being enthusiastic and dynamic. However, the setting of unobtainable objectives will by definition result in 'project' failures and frustration amongst both the field staff and the community.
- (v) The EW works best with a rural community where the political climate is not oppressive. In Matabeleland, where there has been continued military presence and repression, the EW's in the field have been severely restricted in their movements. Master Farmer training sessions have been curtailed as the communities require permission to hold group meetings. As the EW-to-farmer ration is approximately 1:800 homesteads, the EW's are bound to work with groups. By depriving the communities this freedom the EW programme has been drastically curtailed and in some areas the EW has had to withdraw from the area altogether. Many of the EW's in Matabeleland have directly or

indirectly felt the brunt of the military presence and as a consequence their enthusiasm and commitment towards their work has diminished. It will require several years of reconciliation and peace before anything resembling normality is restored in Matabeleland.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations outlined below are based primarily on the experience of Zimbabwe. They should, however, be regarded as broad guidelines only, for their relevance will vary from one country to another.

- (i) Agricultural extension should be given a central position in a rural development strategy.
- (ii) As far as possible there should be a uniform agricultural extension policy throughout the country. The policy should, however, be sufficiently flexible to accommodate regional variations in soils, vegetation, rainfall, population densities and needs as defined by each community etc.
- (iii) The quality of the extension staff should be high but there need not be an excessive preoccupation with academic qualifications. To this end sufficient agricultural training colleges should be established to provide appropriate skills.
- (iv) In-service training is an essential component for successful extension.
- (v) The national structure should be decentralised to permit regional autonomy and decision making.
- (vi) Objective setting should be a priority. Objectives should be modest, attainable, well defined and reviewed annually.
- (viii) A resource centre should be established to collect and analyse reliable base data which are an essential prerequisite for rural development planning. Field staff should be expected to know fully the areas in which they operate.
- (ix) Field staff should work with groups and must liaise with rural communities in the setting of objectives. It is unlikely that the ideal extension ration of 1:50 homesteads will ever be achieved.
- (x) Particular attention should be focused upon women who are likely to be responsible for food crop production.
- (xi) The question of individual versus communal land tenure will require thorough research. The spread of commercial agricultural systems is likely to result in an increasing demand for individual land tenure.
- (xiii) The extension staff should try to complement the work of other department's staff within the community. In sum an integrated approach to agricultural extension and rural development should be adopted.

## CONCLUSION

The agricultural extension service in Zimbabwe although it is well established, has had to undergo a major restructuring after independence to bring it in line with government policy. The changes described have restored the past imbalances with current emphasis now placed on the development of the black communal areas. A loss of

experienced (white) management personnel has been partially offset by rapid Africanisation aided by the return of educated political exiles. There is, however, a lack of managerial experience at management level. Agritex is increasingly aware of the importance of farmer groups and farming communities and is seeking their involvement in the decision making processes. Real problems in this regard do exist. The pivotal role of agricultural extension within the rural development strategy is now acknowledged, but a shortage of manpower, finance, and political stability in Matabeleland, is preventing Agritex from operating at its maximum capabilities. Greater importance should be accorded to the EW's who undertake most of the essential work but who are poorly remunerated and serviced (other than in terms of senior staff).

The various agencies concerned with rural development in South Africa should benefit from the Zimbabwean experience. In particular the importance of appropriate in-service staff training, the necessity to liaise with various other agencies involved in rural development, the absolute necessity of involving the communities in the decision-making process, and the concept of building upon and supporting the useful knowledge and practices of farmers are issues of particular relevance for the decision-makers in South Africa.

#### AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION: THE MAIN ISSUES

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| * Only emphasizing agricultural output                        | or | emphasizing the improved socio economic status of households                                  |
| * Top down imposed technology and changes                     | or | involving communities in the decision making process  |
| * Abandonment of traditional methods                          | or | researching into and building on useful traditional methods                                   |
| * Setting grandiose unobtainable objectives                   | or | setting short-term, modest, attainable objectives based on consultation with farmer groups    |
| * Providing individual instruction (usually to males)         | or | training in group sessions with those responsible for agricultural production (usually women) |
| * Training extension staff once prior to going into the field | or | providing continuous in-service training as well  |
| * Extension staff operate in isolation                        | or | extension staff are part of a multi-disciplinary integrated development programme             |

## BOOKS RECEIVED

William Plomer: **The South African Autobiography**; David Philip Africa south Paperbacks, 1984.

This book is both delightful and distasteful. The delight is inspired by the first half, which deals with Plomer's progenitors, who provide him with an ancestral and historical sense of 'identity' and context along with his 'literary' and 'political' one, and who are perhaps more interesting than Plomer is himself. It is, however, to his credit, that he gives them their due, describing them with affection and humour, displaying (without sentimentality) morality, imagination, kindness and wit. He enters into their existence from Victorian pomatum recipes to their experiences of earthquakes, death and social conscience. A variety of anecdotes are repeated with an almost Bosmanesque combination of humour, precision and irony.

The second half of the book (which concerns Plomer from birth to young manhood) describes Plomer's growing perception of dualities : upper and lower 'classes', the English and the South African, the 'Sermon on the Mount' and 'bayonet practice in the park'. The autobiography also makes evident to what extent his South African existence influenced his South African writings, such as **Turbott Wolfe** and the short story 'Down on the Farm'.

The book is distasteful, however, because of the not entirely justified arrogance which is displayed towards Kipling, Hughes and Scott and the 'bellyaching' and 'name-dropping' which occur, despite Plomer's expressed intentions to the contrary. Furthermore, Plomer's attitudes and vocabulary are unavoidably those of a colonial, albeit a liberal one. The Epilogue is inherently contradictory and

simplistic in spite of his comment that Africa is to him 'a complex and violent revelation' and he ends by diminishing the socio-political role of the artist, advocating 'lawn-order' and benevolence and thus failing to do justice to himself, to **Turbott Wolfe** and to the African experience. □ M.A.Y.

William Plomer: **Selected Stories**; ed. Stephen Gray, David Philip, Africasouth Paperbacks, 1984.

In this selection of short stories, the editor, Stephen Gray, chooses stories representative of four geographical areas: South Africa, Greece, Japan and England. The South African stories comprise roughly half of the book, and stylistically dominate the collection as a whole. Of these stories, "Portraits in the Nude" in particular lingers in the reader's memory. It is a curious story, at once violent and ephemeral, and it is to Plomer's credit that he can align these two atmospheres with success. Other memorable stories include "Down on the Farm", "The Child of Queen Victoria", "Nakamura" and "A Friend of Her Father's", all of which superbly capture the essence of the land about which they are written. Slightly less successful are stories such as "Bed Number Seventeen" and "Local Colour", in which the reader suspects Plomer of attempting to suggest a profundity in a rather insignificant event, of employing suggestion to the point of obscurity — a technique which made this reviewer a little irritated and impatient. Nevertheless, Plomer's **Selected Stories** is certainly a representative selection of the author's work as a whole, and has a deserved place in the history of South African literature. □ K.I.B.