

## STRENGTHENING FARMER ORGANISATIONS: A SYSTEMATIC LEARNING APPROACH FOR IMPROVED SERVICE DELIVERY

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### ABSTRACT

Despite tremendous progress in agricultural development worldwide, millions of people in rural areas of developing countries have not yet been reached. The self-organisational capacity of small-scale farmers is increasingly seen as a way of enhancing their concerted efforts to access appropriate services critical for their agricultural and developmental needs. However, farmer organisations in rural areas are generally weak, and are unable to negotiate and mobilise services for their members. A systematic learning approach for agricultural service delivery reorientation was implemented in South Africa from 1998. This approach was used to strengthen farmer organisations to address challenges faced by farmers at community level

with the aim of enhancing their self-organisational capacity to better articulate their demands for services, co-ordinate services in the community, create strong linkages with service providers and engage in innovation processes that address their local technical problems. Preliminary findings showed that facilitation of organisational development processes enhanced service-delivery provision and innovation processes in the communities. Overall, strengthening local organisations is important for creating partnerships between farmers and external service providers for client-orientated service delivery. In this way, service providers are made more accountable to the farmers. Furthermore, observations indicated that once farmers have solved their agricultural

problems, they are able to address other, non-agricultural developmental needs.

**KEY WORDS:** *SELF-ORGANISATION, CLIENT-ORIENTED, INNOVATION PROCESSES*

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## INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES

Experience from most developing countries reveals that improving farmers' livelihoods often depends on factors that transcend the farmer level (e.g., access to input supply and market) and on collective dimensions that require new forms of interaction and networking among multiple actors (Leeuwis, 2004, p. 11). Attempts were made in South Africa to provide services to the small-scale farmers through the establishment of co-operatives (and projects) in rural areas. However, these co-operatives collapsed because their establishment was not based on making farmers the drivers of their own development, but formed as a means for project intervention by government (Ewang, 1999). Moreover, the majority of small-scale farmers in the rural areas are not members of these farmer organisations.

Just after the country's first democratic elections, the South African government realised that it did not have sufficient practical knowledge on how to deliver services to resource poor rural farmers who were previously neglected. Moreover, the few farmers who were getting services through established farmer organisations (such as co-operative and agricultural projects) did not have ownership of the existing government programmes. In 1998, the Limpopo Department of Agriculture (LDA), in partnership with German technical cooperation (*Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit*, GTZ), established a

programme called 'Broadening Agricultural Services and Extension Delivery' (BASED). The mandate of BASED was to develop an approach that would enable government to respond to the needs of the majority of small-scale farmers in the rural areas of Limpopo Province. In order to achieve this, the programme adopted a systematic learning approach called participatory extension approaches (PEA), which was initially developed in Zimbabwe in the 1990s (Hagmann et al., 1998).

This paper describes in brief how the LDA used PEA to reform the agricultural service by developing the competencies of the extension officers. Through acquired skills, the extension officers facilitated farmer organisational development processes, which fostered the development of innovation processes at community level. It further explores how farmers used their local organisational capacities to co-ordinate agricultural and non-agricultural activities in their communities. Lastly, some insights and implications from the use of this systematic learning approach in strengthening farmer organisations are shared.

The development of systemic competence requires a different approach from conventional training-based capacity-development. The latter, which may be important for some situations (such as building technical capacity), is often organised in modular topics that are isolated from one another. The development of systemic competency is not

based on modular topics, but rather on engaging people in learning processes to enable them to perform their work better (Hagmann *et al.*, 2009).

The capacity-development approach based on a systemic competence-development process consists of learning instruments described by Hagmann *et al.* (2009) as 'learning workshops', 'coaching and mentoring field practice', 'peer-learning groups', 'strategic change management support at organisational level', and 'learning networks and community of practice'. According to these authors, each topic of the subsequent learning workshop builds on the findings of the previous ones and on the field experience. Therefore, each learning workshop is an integral part of an overall concept for systemic competence development.

One of the key cornerstones of the systemic competence development approach is facilitation for change (F4C), which stimulates fundamental change at different levels of service delivery systems. F4C aims at developing emancipation from inside to enable people to better use the space they have to develop their potential. To be able to guide this process, the facilitator can use a wide range of tools (e.g., participatory rural appraisal [PRA] toolbox, visuals, pictures and role-plays) to help people think and reflect (Ngwenya and Hagmann, 2009).

As indicated above, LDA adopted the use of PEA in Limpopo Province to respond to the



developmental constraints and opportunities of the majority of small-scale farmers in 'former homelands'. The PEA process initially emanated from a community-development process in Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe, evolving from a step-by-step interaction between farmers, extension workers and researchers (Hagmann *et al.*, 1998). This approach involves a process that enhances self-organisation at community level and promotes a demand-orientated extension service system (Moyo and Hagmann, 2000).

## **MATERIALS, METHODS AND DATA SOURCES**

### **Competence development of extension staff**

The starting point of the service-delivery reform was to develop the competencies of the officers of the LDA in the theoretical and practical aspects of the PEA process. From the start, the competence development process was designed to be in line with the systemic competence development approach described above. The competence development process started in August 1998 with 40 extension officers and scientists from Capricorn and Vhembe districts of Limpopo Province, who were selected for the purpose of piloting the approach. Three pilot villages were initially selected from each of the two districts to allow trained officers to apply PEA concepts in the communities in between the training workshops. Through cycles of sharing and reflection by the LDA staff members on the learning process, further conceptualisation

of the PEA learning cycle was done. The PEA learning cycle developed in the context of Limpopo experiences was composed of six main phases: initiating change, searching for new ways, planning and strengthening local organisational capacity, experimenting while implementing action, sharing experiences and reflecting on lessons learned, and re-planning (see Figure 1).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Hagmann *et al.* (1997) note that competence development for PEA involves learning over a period of time through short learning workshops and long field implementation by a group of officers supported by mentors. Mentoring is seen by the PEA facilitators as a mechanism for giving support to the newly trained peer-learning teams (PLTs) to develop their competencies during the practical use of the approach in their communities.

By end of 2004, BASED had developed competencies of 377 extension officers from five of the six districts in all phases of the PEA learning cycle. Out of this group, 40 had been identified as trainers and mentors to support future competence development processes. Moreover, 27 of the 40 officers were found to have the skills to apply the PEA process in new contexts.

### **Shaping the local organisational development from practice**

Ngwenya and Hagmann (2009) indicate that F4C is

a strong instrument for operationalising the social development agenda of PEA in terms of inclusion, cohesion and accountability of local organisations. Equipped with facilitation skills, extension officers were in a position to enhance the development of well-functioning local organisations as a vehicle for their social and economic emancipation. Within PEA, local organisational development (LOD) enhances the self-organising capacity of local organisations so they can represent their interests with the service-providers and for other community purposes. At community level, the process of community emancipation emerged when local organisations saw the need to form forums that were known locally as 'umbrella organisations' (UOs). A UO is a village forum whose members are nominated and elected according to agreed criteria developed by the representative groups. The main functions of these forums differed slightly in different communities, but they were mainly established to mobilise participation of community members; to link with service providers and bargain for better services; to organise core experiments/activities (see Box 1); to co-ordinate activities for sharing of experiences; to support planning and monitoring of activities in all groups; and to solve conflicts with minimum external support.

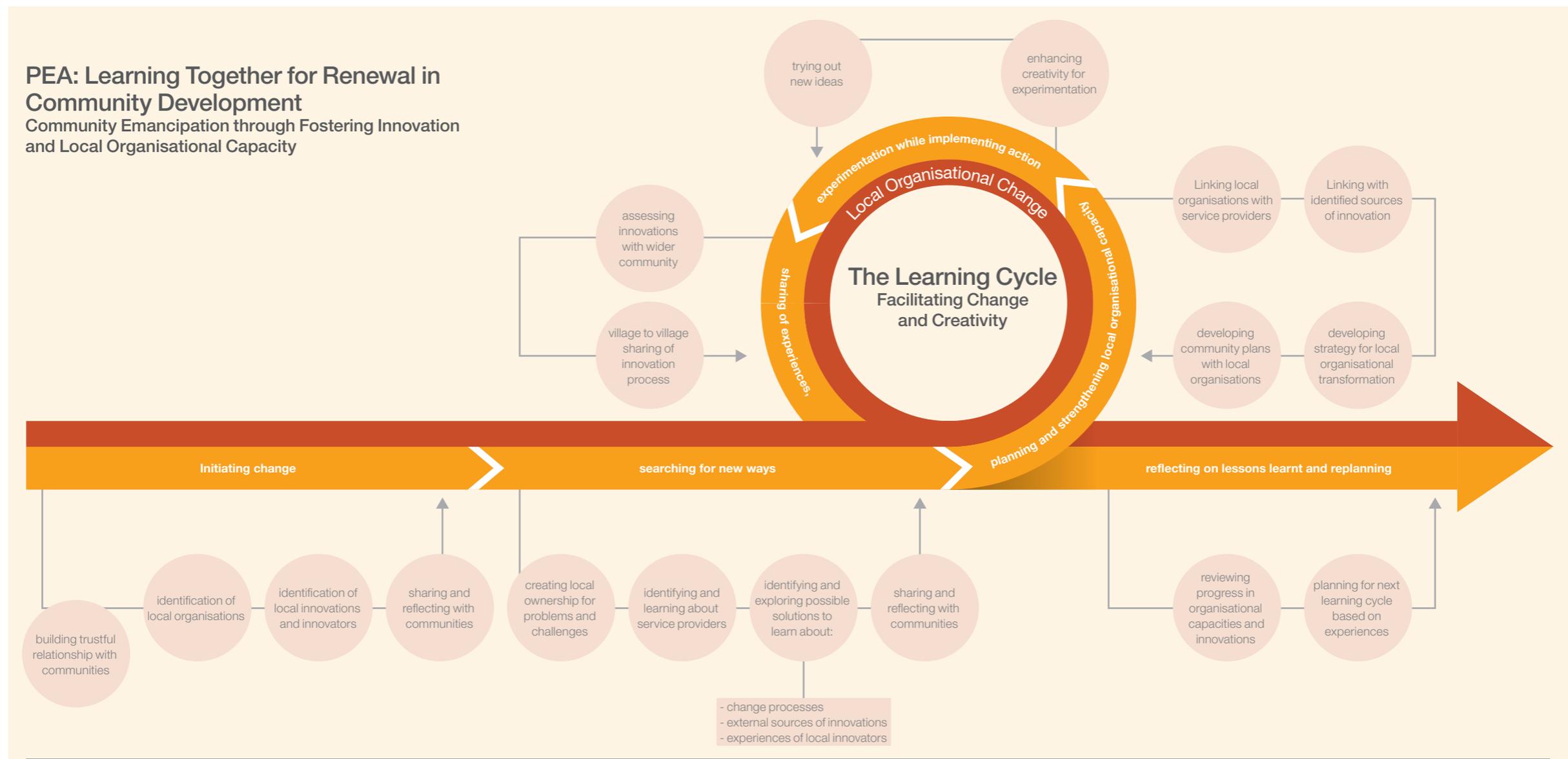
Establishment and strengthening of farmer groups in the communities was enhanced through the use of 'codes'. According to Mutimukuru-Maravanyika (2010), codes are symbolic narratives



that are intended to trigger discussion and bring out issues in a form which all can relate to. In the opinion of Hagmann and Chuma (2002), codes are used by facilitators working with communities as

learning tools to encourage people to share their perceptions and experiences, as well as to discover the value of working together. Codes, some of which included role-plays such as ‘bus-

code’ and ‘river code’, were facilitated and decoded by LDA officers to bring messages that had some parallels with the participants’ situations in the communities. Experience from the PEA



**FIGURE 1: THE BASIC PHASES OF THE LEARNING CYCLE AS DEVELOPED THROUGH AN ACTION-RESEARCH PROCESS IN SOUTH AFRICA (WWW.PICOTEAM.ORG)**



**BOX 1: THE UMBRELLA ORGANISATION AT MBAHELA SUPPORTS LOCAL GROUP WITH FARMER EXPERIMENTATION AND MARKETING OF SWEET POTATO**

The sweet potato group at Mbahela village had 31 members in 1999. Realising their commitment, the UO established linkages between this group and the local commercial farmer in Livhubu area who was selling his produce at the Johannesburg Fresh Produce Market. Supported by the UO to get vines, the group engaged in farmer experimentation to test the adaptability of the two varieties (Blesbok and Bosbok) that were being planted and marketed by the commercial farmer. They also included their own local variety in the experiments. They found Blesbok to be suitable for marketing and the local variety to be good for local consumption. The group benefited from the UO by sending their Blesbok produce to the market through the commercial farmer at a minimum cost.

facilitators was that these codes helped farmers to internalise community values such as self-reliance, self-organisation, unity and cooperation, and the importance of sharing and feedback. During five years of implementing PEA, the extension officers facilitated the establishment of 63 functional UOs in 211 villages. The UOs had 529 agricultural and non-agricultural interest and farmer groups.

**Using farmer organisations to link farmers' demand with response for services**

There is a strong linkage between farmer organisational development and innovation-development process at community level. In addition to competence development in soft skills such as facilitation, the extension officers were also trained in several technical areas such as soil fertility management (SFM), soil and water conservation (SWC), small-scale seed production (SSSP) and livestock management (LM). The technical learning workshops were iterative and in line with the systemic competence development approach. As part of the implementation of PEA, extension officers and researchers developed innovation processes in these technical areas. Similar to the process of strengthening farmer organisations, facilitation skills and tools were important for enhancing innovation development processes in the communities. In SFM, facilitators used different codes for awareness creation, which helped farmers make informed decisions in an attempt to solve their problems of declining soil fertility. As an example, during the feedback of soil analysis results, facilitators used colour posters to initiate discussions on the deficiency of soil nutrients (e.g., nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium) and organic scales<sup>2</sup> to illustrate the importance of organic manure in increasing the water-holding capacity of the soil. The usefulness of these facilitation tools became evident when

the initial UOs built their self-organisational capacity for the collection of money to pay for the cost of soil analysis and for bulk purchase of inputs (see Table 1).

The production of certified open-pollinated varieties was one of the successful innovations that emerged from the implementation of the PEA process in Limpopo and it was later made a flagship project of LDA. This initiative, which was championed by LDA researchers, in collaboration with the Agricultural Research Council (ARC) for Grain Crop Institute (GCI), South African National Seed Organisation (SANSOR) and International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT), was in response to low maize yields experienced by farmers in the rainfed areas of Vhembe district. The following is an extract of what the Political Head of LDA said about this innovation during her budget speech delivered on the 26 April 2005:

*'this initiative, which is currently being implemented in Vhembe, Capricorn and*

2 A simple scale with two trays filled with the same weight of soil: poor in organic matter on one side and with high organic matter on the other side. The two soils are then put in each of a pair of socks and soaked in water, and then put back in the trays. In weighing them again, the one rich in organic matter is heavier. This reveals the link between organic matter-management and drought (water-holding capacity).



*Sekhukhune districts, is expanding quickly, with 108 ha of land under maize seed production. During the 2004 season, 14,230 kg of ZM521 maize seed has been treated and packaged by small-scale farmers. In the past year, farmers in Vhembe and Capricorn established seed growers' associations that now have 750 members. Government has earmarked R 550,000 to help these farmers to complete the registration of their seed cooperative, to scale-up and establish three seed processing centres/depots in the province.'* (Magadzi, 2005)

The organisational capacity of the UOs and affiliated groups in the initial three pilot villages attracted the attention of farmers from neighbouring villages and beyond. For example, after Mbahela village had shared its innovations and the organisational capacity of its UO with other farmers during the mid-season evaluation organised in March 2000, all the other villages in

the irrigation scheme started to implement similar innovations the following season. In this way, the UO become the core for initiating and disseminating innovations in other villages.

A report compiled by Brinkmann (2005) from the impact assessment of innovations at community level after six years of PEA implementation reveals that:

- activities for SFM were implemented in 105 villages;
- activities in SWC were implemented in 99 villages;
- farmers implemented LM innovations in 95 villages;
- SSSP was implemented by the farmers in 98 villages.

The study also showed that each of the villages that had established a UO had implemented one or more of each of these innovations.

### **Broadening the operational scope of local organisations beyond agriculture**

After two years of strengthening local organisations in the pilot villages, two of the six existing UOs were already using their organisational capabilities for accessing electricity and water for their communities. In GaMogano village (one of the initial pilots), after feedback to the community on the findings of an anthropological study, the community took steps to address non-agricultural issues. Feedback of the findings, also given by the members of the UOs who were involved in the study, highlighted (among other issues) increased HIV infection among the local people. Based on this awareness, the chief of the area called a community meeting and invited representatives of the Department of Health. From this process, a home-care group was formed and two of its members became representatives of the village in the UO. Within months, this group had started to conduct training in HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention in the community with the support of the local clinic. Linkages were also made with the maize seed production facilitators to help the health-care group to plant quality protein maize (QPM) crops for the benefit of people living with HIV/AIDS.

The assessment study (Brinkmann, 2005) shows that, by the end of 2004, non-agricultural activities – including bakery, brick production, access to electricity, fence-making and HIV/AIDS

**TABLE 1: ORGANISATION AND DISTRIBUTION OF FERTILISERS IN CAPRICORN AND VHEMBE DISTRICTS**

Type of fertiliser	No. farmers			No. bags (50 kg)			Money contributed by farmers (rand)		
	99/00	00/01	01/02	99/00	00/01	01/02	99/00	00/01	01/02
<b>2:3:2</b>	290	242	1,183	628	441	2,557	46,434	34,504	242,147
<b>LAN</b>	204	84	1,014	259	178	1,218	11,833	14,722	106,074
<b>Super</b>	0	7	14	0	5	43	0	296	2,537
<b>Totals</b>				887	624	3,878	58,267	49,522	350,758
<b>No. villages</b>	3	4	26	3	4	26	3	4	26



awareness – were being implemented in 114 villages (14 in Capricorn, 76 in Vhembe, 9 in Mopani, 9 in Sekhukhune and 6 in Bohlabela) through the support of the established UOs.

## CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In a country like South Africa, where extension officers have worked in villages for more than 20 years providing service to a few individuals, systemic competence development was a key to help them acquire new skills to work differently with the farmers. F4C has enabled the LDA and other stakeholders to work together with farmers to address their social and technical problems. The key to the strengthening of farmer organisations was facilitation skills, which (when used with codes) enhanced the process of local organisational development. Complementing these soft skills with the development of competencies in specific technical areas enabled the extension officers and researchers to develop innovations that address the local agricultural needs of the farmers.

Farmer organisations can play a key role in agricultural innovation once they have the capacity to pool, aggregate and disseminate agricultural knowledge and information. Overall, strengthening of farmer organisations should lead to the development of local innovations for solving farmers' technical problems. Dissemination of innovative local organisational arrangements to

neighbouring communities can be enhanced by exposure to lessons on how other farmers have addressed their technical and organisational challenges. Strong farmer groups are capable of providing basic services to their members that may not necessarily be related to agriculture. Thus, in rural agricultural areas, community members may start by addressing their farming problems and use the lessons for fulfilling the overall need of community development.

Working with strong organisations should also prove to be helpful in developing mechanisms for channelling resources to farmers and communities for increased access to services from government and other development agencies.

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