

THE CHALLENGE OF REFORMING NATIONAL AGRICULTURAL
EXTENSION SYSTEMS IN AFRICA: THE CASE OF UGANDA'S POLICY
REFORM PROCESS 1996–2011

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ABSTRACT

After years of extension reform efforts in Africa, there is still a considerable lack of knowledge on how to provide cost-effective agricultural advisory services that respond to smallholder needs. This paper analyses the case of Uganda's National Agricultural Advisory Services (NAADS), which represents one of the most far-reaching extension reforms in Africa. NAADS adopted a model of decentralising and outsourcing service provision, while at the same time giving farmers' organisations a major role in decision-making. The national service delivery surveys that are regularly conducted by the Uganda Bureau of Statistics show that – in spite of the high levels of investment in NAADS – just 10% of farmers receive extension services. NAADS is also faced with serious governance challenges. This paper

question why an extension reform project that received worldwide attention did not yield more satisfactory results. It focuses on the policy process involved in planning and implementation of the extension service reform. The study used the advocacy coalition framework and concepts of discourse analysis. Empirical research methods included key informant and stakeholder interviews, participant observation, and a review of policy and other documents. The results show that the extension reform process was shaped by the interaction of two advocacy coalitions with conflicting belief systems: a donor-dominated radical reform coalition and a technically oriented gradual reform coalition. The failure to achieve a consensus between these two coalitions contributed to the failure of NAADS since it created

a lack of ownership and lack of participation of key technical staff in its design and implementation. NAADS became vulnerable to political intervention and its potential for policy learning was limited. The paper suggests solutions for addressing the current challenges faced by NAADS and draws broad conclusions for extension policy reform in Africa.

KEY WORDS: *COST-EFFECTIVE, DECENTRALISING, DONOR-DOMINATED, GOVERNANCE, OWNERSHIP*

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INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES

Agricultural extension has been a subject of restructuring and reforms since the early 1990s (Riviera, 1992; Riviera *et al.*, 2001). The restructuring and reforms have been triggered by: the fiscal crisis, the pressure towards more participatory approaches and the adoption of decentralisation (Malvicini, 1996). The goals of agricultural extension include transferring of information from the global knowledge base and local research, to farmers, enabling them to clarify their own goals and possibilities, helping them to make better decisions and stimulating desirable agricultural development. These goals are vital in creating an efficient agricultural sector, without which a country is severely constrained in its ability to feed itself or to import foreign products for consumption and development (Birkhauser *et al.*, 1991; Anderson and Feder, 2004; Birner *et al.*, 2009).

According to the Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries (MAAIF), one of the key challenges facing the agricultural sector in Uganda was the lack of an efficient farmer–extension–research-linkage (MAAIF, 2000). In response to this challenge, Uganda adopted the most far reaching agricultural extension reform in Africa, spearheaded by the National Agricultural Advisory Services (NAADS) programme. This programme was established by an Act of Parliament in 2001 (NAADS Act 2001) as part of the Plan for Modernisation of Agriculture (PMA). It adopted a

decentralised, farmer owned and private sector serviced contract extension system, in the hope that it would be able to contribute to the realisation of agricultural sector objectives.

Studies conducted over the NAADS implementation period showed mixed results on programme performance. In general, some assessment studies showed favourable evaluation (Adipala *et al.* 2003; Friis–Hansen *et al.* 2004; Scanagri UK Ltd, 2005; IFPRI, 2007; ITAD, 2008; Benin *et al.* 2011); but other studies highlighted a more critical picture (Musemakweri, 2007; Parkinson, 2009; World Bank, 2010; Feder *et al.*, 2011). However, most studies conducted on implementation of the NAADS programme were critical (Mangheni *et al.*, 2003; Ramirez, 2003; Obaa *et al.*, 2005). The findings of these studies corroborated the trend from the agricultural production statistics, which consistently showed a steady decline in real growth in agricultural output, from 7.9% in 2000/01, to 0.7% in 2007/08 (MAAIF, 2010). The national service delivery surveys conducted over the same period also showed that only about 10% of Ugandan farmers received extension services. This study therefore sought to establish why the extension reform programme that consumed over 40% of the national agricultural budget, described as a ‘big experiment’ in changing extension in Africa (Chapman and Tripp, 2003), appear not to have yielded satisfactory results. Using the Advocacy

Coalition Framework (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993), the study established that lack of consensus was the key challenge in the agricultural extension reform in Uganda.

MATERIALS, METHODS AND DATA SOURCES

The study focused on the policy process involved in the planning and implementation of agricultural extension reform. The theoretical framework adopted for this study was derived from the Advocacy Coalition Framework (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993). It was enriched by Birner and Resnick (2010), enabling consideration of different influencing factors at the same time. The combination of these approaches acknowledges that policies are driven by interests and institutions, ideas and beliefs, and by time-specific factors. The framework was further enriched by the discourse analysis approach (Hajer, 1995).

The research design and analysis was largely qualitative and influenced by Bogdan and Biklen (2003) and Neuman (2003). The study used an interpretive approach, which emphasises a detailed reading or examination of the text (a conversation, written words or pictures) as an appropriate research method for the study of agricultural extension. The analytical focus was on the policy processes by which NAADS was negotiated and implemented and the subjective understandings of key institutional actors, with emphasis on the relationship between the policy actors. Four attributes in the policy process



were selected to focus the study: approach to extension reform, farmer empowerment, the role of the state and private sector, and self perception of the policy actors.

The study ran 56 semi-structured interviews of staff in key policy-making organs of the state which included: cabinet, parliament, technical ministries and agencies, local government, farmers' organisations, donors and academia. Interview questions focused on policy-making and policy implementation. Participant observations, ongoing informal interactions with key policy actors and review of internal and published documentation related to NAADS provided additional, complementary sources of information. Literature review, data collection and data analysis phases were dispersed throughout the research. Initial findings and analysis were periodically shared with policy actors. Their feedback helped to validate and refine the analysis. A further explanation of the methodology and the broader study from which the findings presented here are taken, are available in the unpublished thesis: 'The Political and Institutional Dimension of Agricultural Extension Reform in Uganda: Experiences of the National Agricultural Advisory Services' (Rwamigisa, 2012).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The theoretical framework used emphasised the importance of beliefs in a policy subsystem. Within the subsystem, it was assumed that actors could

be aggregated into a number of advocacy coalitions, composed of people from various institutions who shared a set of normative or causal beliefs and who often acted together. Based on interviews, participant observations and review of documents, two discourse coalitions, or interest coalitions of policy actors were distinguished. These two coalitions differed fundamentally in how they thought extension should be reformed. For the purposes of this study, the first coalition was referred to as radical reform coalition and the second the gradual reform coalition. The findings below illustrate the different belief systems of the two coalitions and how they shaped the agricultural extension reform process.

Approach to agricultural extension reform

The main belief that distinguished the two coalitions was based on the approach to the reform of the extension system. While both coalitions agreed on the need to reform the extension service delivery system (managed by MAAIF) they did not agree on how to achieve the reform. Members of the radical reform coalition believed that it was not possible to reform the extension system through the MAAIF establishment. As one member of that coalition pointed out:

MAAIF is the most bureaucratic ministry and not flexible to new thinking and approaches. Officials in MAAIF continue to live in the past and

are resistant to reforms. It is very difficult, to advocate for agricultural extension reforms within MAAIF.

This criticism was also outlined in the NAADS master document.

The low productivity of Ugandan farmers is attributed to poorly functioning farmer-extension-research linkages and the consequent failure of the research and extension systems to respond to the real needs of the farmers. Accordingly, emphasis is placed not only on enhancing extension and research efforts but doing so under institutional arrangements that have been transformed to ensure increasing responsiveness to farmers needs (MAAIF, 2000).

Members of the gradual reform coalition held a different view. They argued that the agricultural extension reforms being advocated could be achieved gradually through the public sector, by introducing changes incrementally. They maintained that the farmers and the private sector, as envisaged in the extension reforms, needed to undergo a capacity-building process. This requires time to build the necessary human capital and to change the attitudes and the mindset of stakeholders, and restructure the public institutions and redefine their roles. One member pointed out: 'As long as the same structure, mentality and attitudes across institutions remain, agricultural extension reforms, as advocated, will remain a dream.' Members of the gradual reform coalition



observed that the radical reforms were actually undermining existing institutions and that the focus should be placed on sustainable institution building directed towards the reform process. One coalition member observed:

The radical agricultural extension reforms, as being advocated by the NAADS programme, are institutionally disruptive and destabilising; technically destructive; and may not be sustainable in the long run. We seem not to have drawn lessons from the past extension reforms that have been undertaken in this country.

That fear of the reforms undermining the institutional set-up was well articulated in the following excerpt from the MAAIF policy paper:

The development challenge facing all the actors in the agricultural sector is: how to evolve and build sustainable, efficient agricultural services delivery systems amidst growing and deepening interests, needs and increasing competition, nationally, regionally and globally. Some of the policy and institutional reforms that have been implemented in the past two decades have led to weakening of state structures to coordinate the delivery of agricultural services (MAAIF, 2009).

Role of the state and the private sector

The interpretation of the role of the state in agricultural extension reflected an important difference between the two discourse coalitions on their policy beliefs about the ongoing reform

process. The two coalitions also differed in their assessment of the role of the private sector in agricultural extension service delivery. The radical reform coalition believed that the role of the public sector should be limited to financing, facilitation and co-ordination and service delivery should be a responsibility of the private sector. One member in support of this position stated:

The NAADS program is revolutionising the extension service delivery system by moving away from direct service delivery by the public sector to playing the role of facilitation, capacity building and setting standards of services. The private sector is responsible for the direct provision of the extension services to the farmers.

This view was echoed by the World Bank. In his presentation at a technical workshop in Kampala, a World Bank technical official stated:

We need to proceed to the next stage. We may call this ‘making markets work,’ and ‘making decentralisation work.’ Not just ‘going to market,’ but making it work! This means firmly establishing a legal and regulatory system that facilitates private sector activity that is reliable and well understood that can be counted on because it squeezes out of the system all the last vestiges of harassment, arbitrariness, uncertainty, and lack of transparency (Donovan, 1998).

Regarding the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of the private sector in the delivery of agricultural extension services, members of the radical reform

coalition believed that a well-developed private sector is more efficient and better positioned to provide extension services than the public sector.

Members of the gradual reform coalition argued that the public sector still has an active role to play in the provision of extension services and that it is too early to divest extension services to the private sector. They reasoned that the private sector was still in its nascent stage and unable to assume the roles advocated for it by the proponents of the reform. They believed that private sector participation should be limited to areas with demonstrated competencies and that the divestiture of extension functions should be incrementally undertaken and matched with public sector investments along value chains of targeted enterprises. A member of the gradual reform coalition noted:

For private service provision to take root for any agricultural enterprise there must be pragmatic and systematic investments along the entire value chain of the enterprise as demonstrated in tea, cotton and coffee where private companies engage their own private extension agents. There are no deliberate efforts by the state or the private sector to undertake such investments along the entire value chain. In addition, the capacity of the private service providers to provide quality and efficient services is questionable”.

Another member in support of this observation stated:



as market failures remain, it will be difficult for private service delivery system, as pursued under the NAADS program, to be successful. In my opinion, demand for extension services will only be meaningful, if farmers have reliable markets for their produce.

Those observations were also reflected in the MAAIF policy paper on private sector service provision, as envisaged under NAADS. The paper raised the following challenging questions:

The proposal to build the capacity of the private sector to provide agricultural services is an acknowledgement that the private sector did not have the necessary capacity to impart the necessary advice to farmers. What are the causes of low private sector capacity to support agricultural service delivery, in spite of the abundance of major factors of production i.e. land and labour? Why has the private sector not picked up these incentives to offer these services to date? What are the chances that the service provider market is strong enough to sustain consistent, integrated, and high quality services to an agricultural sector that has increasing challenges; and has demonstrably been under-performing even in comparison of the periods before 1970? (MAAIF, 2009).

On the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of private sector service delivery, the gradual reform coalition members believed that in the present circumstances, the private sector had limited

capacity and contracting them would be too expensive to be sustainable. One member of the coalition observed:

The most cost-effective means of delivering a technology to such a big number of smallholder farmers is through established government structures. Given the prevailing circumstances, where the private sector is in formative stage, it is difficult to believe that the private agencies are more cost-effective when they are motivated by profit.

Farmer empowerment

Interviews and participant observations of the two discourse coalitions revealed contrasting perceptions on farmer empowerment. The radical reform coalition believed that for a long time, the farmer had not been given an opportunity to participate in decision-making about the kind of extension services he/she needed. They contended that there was a need to create avenues for the farmers to be heard in decision-making processes and to liberate them from the bureaucratic top-down decision-making process that characterised the public sector. Members of this coalition perceived themselves to be the true defenders of farmer interests and advocated for farmer empowerment as one of their major priorities, well embedded in the design of the NAADS programme. This belief was well articulated by one member of the coalition who stated:

Unlike the past extension approaches that were largely regulatory and supply-driven in nature, the

NAADS program is a departure from these approaches and advocates for development of strong farmer institutions through which their voices can be heard; and through which they can demand, own and control the extension service.

While members of the gradual reform coalition subscribed to the farmer empowerment concept, they did not believe that the way the NAADS programme was being implemented was in effect empowering the farmers. They thought that the farmers groups that were formed perceived themselves as being part of NAADS, but not NAADS being part of them. This perception was ably captured in the following observation by one member of this coalition:

Since the inception of the programme, NAADS has formed on average over 10,000 farmer groups per year and with a false perception that they belong to NAADS. From a management point of view, sustainability of these groups will largely depend on ownership which stems from the vision of the group developed during the formative stages. This is the major motivating factor for the group to maintain coherence among its members. In most districts, these groups are referred to as NAADS groups. The implication of this reference is that farmers and other participating stakeholders may perceive these groups as formed for purposes of fostering NAADS activities. There is a potential risk of disintegration of these groups, once the NAADS programme comes to an end. This



therefore means the objective of empowering farmers is undermined by the false perception of belonging to NAADS.

Perception of the other coalition

Participant observations and interviews highlighted interesting perceptions of each coalition towards the other coalition. The radical reform coalition perceived the other coalition as interested in defending the vested interests of bureaucracy and politicians and was opposed to any reform likely to alter the status quo. One member of the radical reform coalition observed:

Since colonial times, agricultural extension has been a domain of the public sector, highly centralised with the traditional vertical bureaucratic structure. Public extension agents protect themselves and hide their inefficiencies behind this bureaucracy. The NAADS programme is attempting to break this tradition and it is expected to face resistance from the traditional bureaucrats.

The gradual reform coalition perceived members of the other coalition as allies of development partners, captured by reform models that they are unable to conceptualise and fit in the existing development framework. One member observed:

Government has chosen to establish two parallel systems in the agricultural sector: the first is the liberal and flexible system through agencies, such as NAADS, dominated by the so called “Reformers” who in effect are rent seekers and

captured by reform models designed in western capitals. The second is the mainstream bureaucratic system of civil service of MAAIF and local governments. Donors found it convenient to foster reforms that best suit their interests, through the liberal system.

Another member echoed the same belief, asserting:

Agricultural extension reforms have been pushed by an alliance of development partners, and a group of “reformers” within the government system who have worked closely to undermine the authority of MAAIF in the reform process. The alliance of donors and the “reformers” has undermined the capacity of government to negotiate; and it has also fostered interests and influence of donors in the reform process.

The established view for the failure of the agricultural extension reforms in Uganda is that the NAADS programme was politically captured (Joughin and Kjaer, 2010; World Bank, 2010). This study shows that the extension reform process was shaped by the interaction of two advocacy coalitions with conflicting belief systems. Based on the findings, radical reform coalition pursued a radical approach to reform, while gradual reform coalition was associated with a gradual approach to reform. Radical reform coalition was donor-dominated and more endowed with financial resources and gradual reform coalition was technically-oriented. As the results illustrate, the

two coalitions had conflicting belief systems. The inability to achieve a consensus between these coalitions played a key role in the failure of NAADS, as it was associated with lack of ownership and lack of participation in NAADS’ design and implementation. The lack of consensus during the agricultural extension reform process meant that the proponents of the reform had to rely more on resources to get things done than on the processes and values. Since their values appeared not broadly shared, as demonstrated in the results, the reform processes were significantly weakened, thus affecting the outcomes of the NAADS programme. This made NAADS vulnerable to political interventions as reported in the literature, thus limiting its potential for policy learning.

CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The low agricultural productivity observed in Ugandan agriculture prior to establishment of NAADS was attributed to poorly functioning farmer–extension–research linkages and the consequent failure of the research and extension systems to respond to the real needs of the farmers. However, after a decade of agricultural extension reforms, as spearheaded by the NAADS programme, agricultural productivity in Uganda has not improved and the number of farmers reached by the extension system has remained low. This study provides an insight into the reasons



why a reform programme that was carefully planned and received worldwide attention could not meet expected results. The findings of this study suggest a need to build consensus among the policy actors that would ensure ownership of the reform programme, leading to its legitimacy and enhanced commitment by key institutional actors. Since many African countries are grappling with the challenge of reforming their national agricultural extension systems, the need to build consensus, ownership and legitimacy in the reform process, highlighted by this study, may be relevant.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors wish to express their gratitude for the financial support received from the Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries of the Republic of Uganda, the United States Agency for International Development and the International Food Policy Research Institute.

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