

EXPERIMENTING WITH AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION IN ZAMBIA: CARE'S LIVINGSTONE FOOD SECURITY PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

In many southern African countries the role of national agricultural extension systems over the last two to three decades has been mainly to promote the hybrid maize and fertiliser packages of the Green Revolution. The assumption has always been that this would prove the saving of southern African smallholder agriculture and food security. Over the last eight or nine years another revolution has, however, swept the region that of economic structural adjustment and reform programmes. Inefficient parastatal institutions have been a particular target for economic liberalisation programmes, and this has led to the demise of many former state-supported smallholder agricultural systems. Zambia is a case in point. A series of droughts in the early 1990s, and the disappearance of parastatals which had been supplying subsidised hybrid maize and fertiliser inputs to more remote parts of the country, have left large numbers of smallholder farmers facing a significant crisis. They are being forced to adapt their farming systems. The national extension system has found itself unable to meet this relatively sudden but huge demand. This had led to growing self-inquiry about how the institution might reform itself and become relevant in an era in which it is increasingly important for institutions to demonstrate effective performance if they are to maintain financial support.

This paper documents the start-up of an NGO project, the Livingstone Food Security Project, run by CARE in south east Zambia. The project, which pilots some features of an alternative extension model, is being carried out in collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries. In the first three seasons of the project, a series of participatory livelihood and needs assessment exercises have been conducted, milage management committees (VMCs) have been established, and a seed loan scheme has been implemented through these institutions. These interventions have helped the satisfy the priority requirements of communities hit by successive droughts. Working with the VMCs and farmer extension facilitators, the project has achieved extensive coverage of farmers in its second and third seasons with small numbers of field staff. Collaboration with the government extension service is also increasing as the project provides training in participatory assessment approaches and community institution-building to field staff from districts outside the immediate project area. Technically, the project's

broader farming systems and resource management challenges are just beginning in helping smallholder farmers develop more resilient production systems. However, with the role of the private sector in agricultural extension also increasing, the project is helping to demonstrate a partnership model of extension which may be more appropriate for the future, both in Zambia and elsewhere.

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Acronyms

ASIP	Agricultural Sector Investment Programme
BS	Block Supervisor
CEW	Camp Extension Worker
CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
CBO	Community-based organisation
DAC	District Agricultural Committee
DAO	District Agricultural Officer
DFID	Department for International Development (UK)
FEF	Farmer Extension Facilitators
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development (Italy)
LFSP	Livingstone Food Security Project
MAFF	Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Zambia)
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
PAM	Programme Against Malnutrition
PAO	Provincial Agricultural Officer
PRA	Participatory rural appraisal
T&V	Training and visit
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
VMC	Village Management Committee
WASHE	GRZ/UNICEF Water, Sanitation and Health Education Programme

Experimenting with agricultural extension in Zambia: CARE's Livingstone Food Security Project

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1 INTRODUCTION

One of the major policy, and indeed practical, dilemmas in Southern Africa at the present time is how to improve the performance and cost-effectiveness of national extension systems. In Zambia the problems affecting the national extension service relate to both resource levels and methodology. The Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries (MAFF) does not have adequate resources to meet the operational costs of the country's extension service as it is currently structured. For instance, in the 1996 agricultural sector investment programme (ASIP) budgeting exercise, the Extension Branch was forced to reduce its initial national budget estimate of \$31 million to the available figure of \$14 million;¹ this in a situation where many of the Ministry's services and facilities are already seriously under-capitalised and poorly maintained.

Second, even if the Extension Branch were more fully funded, the existing extension methodologies of the Ministry have not shown much likelihood of effectively eliciting and addressing farmers' priority needs. This problem is particularly acute in the current fast-changing economic and agro-ecological environment. Two things have happened during the 1990s which have completely altered agricultural production in Zambia. One of these is the structural adjustment process. This has led to the demise of the former system of subsidies, which supported the national production of maize, as well as the parastatal institutions which regulated the subsidy programme for input supply and marketing. The second area of change has been the drying out of the environment - according to farmers — exemplified by the run of three bad droughts in the southern half of *Zambia*, in the first four seasons of the decade. Since then there have been two better years, but still the trend is towards shorter and more erratic rainy seasons and the lowering of water tables.

Farmers, particularly in the drier parts of Zambia, are being forced to alter their cropping systems in response to these changed circumstances. The agricultural extension service has been slow to meet farmers' new needs. At the same time, there has been a dearth of commercial input supply organisations stepping in to satisfy the new seed requirements of small-scale farmers. There is now widespread agreement between technocrats and farmers alike that a considerably more dynamic extension system is required.

There is growing consensus that new - and especially more participatory - models are needed. It is, however, easier for an agency *outside* government to introduce experimental approaches; within the extension service

itself it is difficult to generate the energy to initiate reforms, unless convincing results on a sufficiently large scale can already be shown. This paper examines one attempt to provide such convincing results. It reviews the progress of the Livingstone Food Security Programme, implemented by the NGO, CARE, in the Livingstone and Kalomo Districts of Zambia's Southern Province. What is important about this experiment and the model that it is developing is that the Ministry of Agriculture is a full collaborative partner with CARE. The success of the project has led to growing interest within the Ministry in replication of key components of the approach elsewhere in Southern Province.

In summary, the distinctive components of the model are:

- its interactive, participatory methodology through which the whole programme is designed, managed and monitored;
- its emphasis on developing the capacity of local institutions and on training farmer-to-farmer extension facilitators nominated by these institutions;
- its high extension staff:farmer ratios in comparison to the government extension services;
- its emphasis on adaptive change and flexibility, and consequently its integration of research and extension, and the greater scope given to field staff to think and make decisions themselves;
- the collaborative partnership that is being developed between CARE, the government extension and research services (including the local farming systems research team), and private sector institutions;
- its emphasis on women farmers and their representation in community-level decision-making bodies.

The model seems to have a good deal of potential for replicability elsewhere. This paper draws on the wider experiences of the co-authors (who have all worked for the Farming Systems Research Team in the Research Branch of the Ministry of Agriculture), as well as CARE's operational field staff, in order to set CARE's experiment in the context of the current issues and problems affecting the government extension service in Zambia. This should enable other readers to assess the relevance of this experiment to their own circumstances.

2 BACKGROUND TO CARE'S AGRICULTURAL PROGRAMME

Since November 1994 CARE has been implementing a series of project activities in the southern province of

Zambia, collectively referred to as the Livingstone Food Security Programme (LFSP). The programme is based in Livingstone town but operates in Livingstone District and the southern and western parts of Kalomo District. It has two major components — agriculture and water harvesting - although a small, experimental savings and credit component has also been initiated.

For the purposes of this discussion the focus will be on the agricultural component. The main activities within this component are: community-based seed multiplication and distribution; institutional capacity building; farmer-to-farmer extension and small-scale irrigation development. Soil and moisture conservation activities are soon to be initiated. As with other CARE projects in Zambia, these activities were arrived at following a series of participatory appraisal activities conducted in different farming system zones. During the appraisals communities worked jointly with CARE staff to analyse farmer livelihoods, to identify the key problems and issues affecting these livelihoods, to reach some consensus on what communities felt were their major needs, and to agree on next steps and mutual roles and responsibilities.

In its first two seasons (1994-95 and 1995-96), the project was implemented mainly by five staff: the Project Manager, a community development coordinator (now training coordinator) and three field staff. The main agricultural activity has been the introduction of drought tolerant crops through a community-based seed distribution and bulking up scheme. Information on crop and soil agronomy, seed handling and post harvest storage topics has also been provided.

In the first season of operation - during which the project staff were also involved in implementing a food relief operation - a pilot seed scheme was run with just 330 farmers, virtually on an individual basis. For the 1995-96 season, the scheme was institutionalised. Village management committees (VMCs) were established and these, in turn, registered constituent seed groups, consisting of four to seven households. One hundred and eighty VMCs were established with over 6,800 participating farmers in the main operational area in Livingstone and Kalomo south. In 1996-97 the scheme was expanded into Kalomo west, which increased the number of participating farmers to 9,600. In 1995-96 each field officer was working with an average of about 2,265 farmers. In 1996-97, three further field staff were taken on, and the ratio of field officers to farmers fell to 1:1,600. Eight field staff will cope with an expansion to 14,000 farmers in 1997-98, a ration of 1:1,750. More account of the institutionalisation process will be provided in section four.

The scheme's rapid expansion over the last two seasons has been aided by two factors: farmers' urgent need for more drought tolerant crop varieties and the demonstrated success of the varieties provided by the LFSP. As the project seeks to expand the scope of its activities and address with farmers the issues of longer term farming system sustainability, the actual

effectiveness of the institutionalisation process will be tested more thoroughly. Perhaps the main challenge facing this extension model will be whether staff can remain in touch with what is happening on the ground and continue to learn from their experience. At this stage the achievements of the VMCs vary greatly. A few VMCs have successfully met the requests of non-participating farmers in neighbouring villages by extending their own seed loan and training schemes to those villages. The efforts of others to establish seed banks have fallen apart because of fears of witchcraft.

3 ISSUES AFFECTING THE NATIONAL EXTENSION SERVICE IN ZAMBIA

The government extension service in Zambia is the responsibility of what was, until recently, the Extension Branch of the Department of Agriculture in the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries (MAFF).² At national level, the former Assistant Director was assisted technically by seven chief and senior Subject Matter Specialists (SMSs). At the provincial level, the Provincial Agricultural Officers (PAOs) are in charge of all agricultural development activities. They are supported by provincial SMSs, who are responsible for overall extension activities in each province. Then, at district level, the District Agricultural Officers (DAOs) have their own SMSs, who work at field level with Block Supervisors (BSs) and Camp Extension Workers (CEWs). A camp thus constitutes the ultimate level of extension outreach. CEWs are expected to have regular contact with farmers.

Altogether, the National Extension Programme is operated through a structure spanning nine provinces, 64 districts, 327 blocks, and 1,260 camps (Summary of Policy Framework Paper, ASIP, 1996). Of the 2,400 staff who work within the extension service, about half are based at camp and block levels. The overall average staff: farmer ratio is about 1:600 but, in practice in different parts of the country, the ratio varies greatly from about 1:200 to 1:1,500. The main reason for this variation is the differing population densities in different areas, although the attractiveness of different camps to extension staff is also a consideration (there are more vacant positions in the more remote postings). It has been estimated that only 5% of extension staff are women (IFAD, 1993).

Over the past decade, the Zambian national extension service has experimented with various versions of the Training and Visit System (T&V). These versions have been tested in different geographical areas at different times, usually under the auspices of different donor-funded projects. The Ministry is now seeking to develop a national, coordinated service in line with the National Extension Action Plan (1993). In Southern province, where the LFSP is located, MAFF is implementing a modified version of the T&V system. The number of staff training sessions will be significantly reduced (due principally to budget limitations) and the intention is to make the approach 'more participatory'. A Southern

Province Household Food Security Project, developed by IFAD, provides a framework - and mandate - for encouraging more participatory extension and farming systems approaches within the province. This project has proved valuable in gaining the Provincial Agricultural Officer's support for the innovations pioneered by the LFSP.

Over the years a range of concerns about the extension system in Zambia have been raised by various people, including some in the Ministry itself (Extension Action Plan 1993; ASIP Framework papers 1992, 1996). These concerns are predominantly logistical and methodological in nature. Commonly discussed logistical constraints are: the lack of adequate transport facilities; poor housing; the lack of training facilities; and the poor conditions of service (leading to the problems of a poor attitude towards work and low morale among staff). Another problem is the lack of qualified staff at field level. This feeds into problems on the methodology side. The main concerns relating to methodology are as follows.

Top down approach

The most profound problem with the national extension approaches tried so far is that they have all been heavily top down and rigid. This means that nearly all important decisions concerning methodology must be made at national headquarters. The system provides little encouragement for locally specific modifications to take place, although variations between provinces do occur in the way the T&V system is implemented. Typically, these variations are tried by different projects operating at district or provincial level, only to be followed by a return to the 'usual system' which takes place after the project funding dries up.

High cost

T&V systems are expensive to operate. Extensive training of field staff and farmers takes place, which necessitates a great deal of expenditure on travel and lodging. The system also requires a large cadre of field staff, and SMSs must have vehicles to visit the field. This problem has made it clear from the outset that the T&V system is inappropriate for the Zambian context. Rather than acknowledging this, the government has attempted to reduce costs by cutting back on activities such as training, thus jeopardising the whole rationale of the system.

Rigidity

The system is rigid in that it lacks effective feedback mechanisms which allow change to occur. Staff must accept the whole 'package'; a camp officer who attempts to make a modification is not considered to be 'working' by his supervisor. This is the same at higher levels. It is conformity to the system, regardless of local challenges, which counts as doing the job. Often this rigidity has robbed field staff of any capacity or motivation to address farmers' real situations. Examples of this rigidity range from the content of proposed extension messages, to recommendations about how to approach or arrange

farmers for extension purposes. Extension messages have often remained virtually the same across different regions in the country, categories of farmer, and despite seasonal variability in not only rainfall but also input availability.

Lack of area-specific goals and objectives

Another dimension of the rigid, top down syndrome is the absence of well-defined, area specific goals and objectives, even at district level. Staff often have to work with broad national goals and objectives, such as 'to fight malnutrition', 'to improve food production/food security', which are never translated into more specific and appropriate district objectives. Hence, no meaningful local outputs or targets are set. Staff tend to lack focus and waste resources trying to do everything - a shotgun approach which makes the pretence of covering every farmer, while meeting the needs of very few.

Monitoring focuses on activity or process indicators, such as number of farmers visited, number of visits made per community or farmer, or number of training sessions held by the extension officer. Even technology adoption is systematically assessed only in exceptional cases, such as when extension relates to a particular project or a team of researchers brought together for a specific purpose. Thus the actual impact and effectiveness of the extension service are rarely assessed.

Lack of professional staff at field level

The difficulty the extension service has in being adaptive is exacerbated by the absence of professional staff at field level. Until recently, there were no graduate staff at all at district level. Such staff were limited to provincial posts. Even now, in most cases, it is only the District Agricultural Officer (DAO) who may be a university graduate (except in urban districts like Lusaka). Normally the District SMSs hold a three-year diploma in agriculture, at best. Recently some diploma holders have been posted to head extension blocks, but otherwise most blocks and camps are staffed by two-year certificate holders.

These low levels of training would not be inherently problematic if the quality of training institutions was better, and if the heuristic methodologies used were more relevant to the contemporary issues and situations which trainees confront once they have graduated. The lack of staff with adequate technical and analytical skills means that MAFF does not have the capacity to facilitate the evolution of a locally-adapted extension system. Thus, field staff act only as the implementors or messengers of centrally developed extension packages. Extension ceases to be a supportive, information providing service addressing the real economic needs of the rural population. In terms of the professional communication approach and attitude needed to initiate, plan, and run communications processes and campaigns with farmers, farmer associations, NGOs, traders, the media and others, there is a complete lacuna.

Lack of partnership strategy

The extension service also lacks mechanisms to

incorporate the contributions of other information providers, including farmers themselves. It even finds it hard to work with fellow government ministries, departments, or even other branches of the same department. Zambia has struggled over the years to develop effective working linkages between the Extension and Research Branches of the same Department of Agriculture. Even in the recent National Action Plans of the two Branches there remain glaring gaps in the modalities and mechanisms of achieving such linkages. Moreover, despite reference being made within the ASIP to working with NGOs and other private organisations, the procedural mechanisms still require extensive negotiation by any outside institutions seeking to work with the Ministry.

No community institutional capacity-building

An important outcome of the many inadequacies noted above is that the extension service lacks effective strategies for institutional capacity building at community level. This means that the smallholder farming community remains dependent on government services year after year rather than building up its own bodies and networks for linking farmers, traders and other relevant actors. Farmers become conditioned to waiting for advice from the extension services, because of the dearth of alternative means of obtaining information. Now that the fast-changing economic and physical environment is rendering unproductive local varieties and practices, this is a particular problem.

Gender itisensitivity

It has been said many times that the majority of farmers in rural areas of Africa are female. Most extension staff, on the other hand, are male (only 5% of extension staff in Zambia are women). It has also been noted that when the extension service does seek to involve women, it tends to isolate them in womens' clubs, where they sew, knit and cook. There is little effort to address the principal livelihood problems of women, such as their need for labour saving technologies; household food crops (which can also meet cash needs); and soil fertility management practices which rely on crop rotations and do not require expensive inputs or heavy labour. It is in these areas that effort should be concentrated.

4 ATTEMPTING TO ADDRESS THE ISSUES: THE LFSP'S CAPACITY-BUILDING STRATEGY

CARE's experience to date is drawn from the experience of two seasons of operation of the Livingstone Food Security Programme. A third season's operation will be evaluated shortly. This may appear, as indeed it is, a limited period of time from which to draw conclusions. Already, though, lessons of significant value are emerging. For instance, most of the CARE field staff are ex-MAFF, but in their new jobs they are able to think

differently and to work with much stronger motivation because of the extremely participatory methodology adopted by CARE and CARE's different approach to resource use.³ Some of the major factors defining CARE's approach — particularly those which differentiate it from the conventional approach of MAFF — are outlined below.

Defining the challenges — the need for adaptive change

Perhaps the most significant contrast between the MAFF and the CARE approaches lies in the way that the challenges of rural development are defined. In the CARE programme these challenges have emerged through a process of dialogue with farmers, and are essentially threefold. The first two relate to helping farmers adapt to the new realities of structural adjustment, and the third to dealing with environmental change.

- (i) Under structural adjustment the state sponsored support system for the production of hybrid maize has disappeared. Throughout the 1980s hybrid maize and fertiliser was the main technology package being promoted by both the research and extension systems in Zambia. In many rural areas, it could only be promoted through intentional or unintentional subsidy. Fertiliser, for instance, was subsidised as, often, was the maize price; moreover, most of the credit handed out was not repaid, so this was in effect another subsidy. In areas such as Kalomo South the challenge, now, is to help farmers to adjust to a new economic reality, in particular to help them develop economic, or non-subsidised livelihood systems.
- (ii) The second challenge related to the effect of structural adjustment results from the demise of the old parastatal institutions which kept the maize system functioning. These institutions — Zamseed, Lintco, Lima Bank, Zambia Cooperative Federation and its affiliated cooperative societies and Nitrogen Chemicals of Zambia — all survived through repeated government handouts or write-offs. Now all these institutions have either completely withered away or suffered severe amputation. As the government's research and extension services were strongly connected to these institutions, they too need to reorient themselves. In particular they must find new partnerships of a qualitatively different nature to replace their old relationships and dependencies. The challenge here is to cope with the demise — or lack of viability — of the old institutional forms, and to generate new institutional forms which are viable in their particular operational contexts. If the extension service is unable to make this shift and unable to find greater contemporary relevance, then it too will face the danger of severe amputation,
- (iii) The third challenge is to deal with environmental change. Droughts occurred in the southern half of Zambia in three of the first four seasons of the 1990s. In the participatory appraisal exercises carried out

during the planning of the LFSP, farmers referred frequently to the declining rains, a trend which has been taking place since the late 1970s, and the effect of this change on the environment and their crop production systems. In a follow-up topical appraisal exercise carried out in early in 1997, in a former wetland area, farmers noted how the drying up of former sheets of water had led to an outmigration of population due to the decline of fishing as a source of income and livelihood support, and the fact that water for humans and livestock was becoming more difficult to find. The areas of alluvial soils that remained were still 'key resources' in that they provided the most fertile soils for production, and were the sites of drinking water wells. However, the further drying up of these areas was beginning to cause a water crisis and was certainly threatening the sustainability of the cropping system (Osborne, Hedley, Kasanga, 1996).

What is important about all three of these challenges, defined jointly with farmers, is that none is amenable to an 'off-the-shelf' solution. CARE's starting premise is that it is operating with farmers in an environment which is qualitatively different from that which existed previously. There is therefore a need to develop new production and livelihood systems, through a process of adaptive change.

Participation in LFSP

There are considerable strategic similarities between the process followed in the LFSP project and that described by David Mosse for the Kribhco Indo-British Rainfed Farming Project (KRIBP) in western India (Mosse *et al.*, 1996). Mosse describes participation in KRIBP as involving at least three different levels of objectives: (i) participation as a mechanism for consultation; (ii) participation for capacity building; and (iii) participation as part of a quest for institutional sustainability. All of these objectives are shared by the LFSP. Thus, as in KRIBP, participation is not merely a handy tool to gather information about farmers, but is a principle - or rather a set of principles — which underlie the whole project process. The principles guide the programme to:

- use PRA exercises and follow up negotiations with communities in project design;
- implement project activities wholly through community level institutions;
- build the capacity of these institutions, through training, planning and monitoring activities (subsequently the institutions are encouraged to diversify their activities);
- encourage the federation of institutional units, as relationships of trust develop, to increase bargaining power and the ability of local people to procure services directly;
- train community selected technical agents (farmer extension facilitators), who serve and are responsible to the community institutions.

The following sections provide more detail about the operationalisation of the principles.

Programme start-up

The overall goal of the LFSP is to reduce vulnerability to drought and to achieve household food security by addressing the underlying causes of vulnerability. The strategy for achieving this was formulated in an extensive participatory planning process carried out during CARE's drought relief efforts which began in November 1994, following the poor 1993-94 season. CARE was working through village-level drought relief committees in the Livingstone and Kalomo areas. At the same time it established a pilot seed loan scheme, so that the communities' relationship with CARE would move from the dependency associated with the relief scheme to a more sustainable and healthy partnership. The details of the seed scheme are outlined in Box 1.

Box 1. Community institutions - the case of on-farm seed multiplication and water management

In its pilot year the LFSP initiated a simple seed loan scheme. The project's three field staff discussed the scheme at village meetings convened for the drought relief exercise. The 330 individual farmers who subsequently participated in the scheme were those that registered with local government extension workers after such meetings. This was the maximum number of farmers that the programme could handle, given its strategy to work directly with individual farmers, with some help from MAFF extension staff. Seed distributed by CARE (drought-tolerant sorghum and cowpeas) proved popular and many farmers wanted to be involved.

The following season CARE expanded the scheme. After the CARE field staff had held area level meetings to discuss the scheme, interested villages called their own meetings at which three-person Village Management Committees (VMCs) were elected. These then acted as the umbrella organisations, registering under them solidarity groups, consisting of four to seven households. Within these groups, each member household received seed for one crop (out of the two to four available - the crops had previously been agreed by the group as a whole) which it then bulked up and shared with other group members.

VMCs were formed in ten focal areas of the project (three more than in first season). In all 180 VMCs were formed. These, in turn, registered and distributed seed to over 6,800 farmers (an increase of 1800% over the first season). In the second season, seed was loaned on a 2:1 basis, with additional provision for wastage. For sorghum, for instance, 3.5 kg of seed (sufficient to plant 0.5 ha) was loaned to each farm family. The family was obligated to return 8 kg of seed at the end of the growing season. Collection was handled by the VMC. On occasions when seed returns outstripped demand for new seed, the VMC was permitted to retain the seed and to determine what it would do with it. A number reloaned the seed, effectively expanding the scheme to new members, and in some cases, entirely new, outlying villages.

The expansion of activities was primarily the result of farmers organising themselves through the VMCs. The VMCs supervised fellow farmers in their groups and in many cases appointed a facilitator who, after receiving technical training, was able to train other farmers. Soon the MAFF extension service was also able to use the VMCs and facilitators to carry out extension work. Facilitators were particularly important in areas where there was no MAFF staff member.

Further, when a community-based domestic water programme sponsored by UNICEF (WASHE) started up in the area, its task was made easier as communities using common water points came together simply by federating their VMCs to form an Area (Water) Committee. The Area Committees have also been used by MAFF Extension staff and there seems to be potential for them to play a role in procuring market services or even to federate further into larger associations which might undertake joint marketing ventures.

Between March to May 1995, whilst the pilot seed scheme was in operation, a series of three community PRA exercises was conducted in different farming system zones in the Kalomo south area. A detailed understanding of household livelihoods was developed using techniques such as social mapping to identify different livelihood categories. Each exercise concluded with a large meeting at which all the outputs from the week's work were presented back to the participants. Different village groupings then prepared and presented responses to this analysis, listing their priorities for follow-up activities (LFSP, Mandia, Katapazhi and Makunka PRA Reports 1995). The whole idea of working through community institutions was also discussed in these meetings.

During the PRA exercises, Venn diagram analyses of existing institutions were conducted with a view to identifying possible institutional bases for project activities. However, in the final round-up sessions with the communities it was agreed that they would elect new, three person committees - to include a women's representative - to oversee future activities.

Following these PRA exercises, which took place in three of the seven areas in which CARE was working during that season, an overall synthesis of priorities was prepared. Further planning meetings were then held with the same communities. The aim of these meetings was to reach agreement on the strategic framework for the project. Only after these meetings had taken place was the final project proposal prepared.

Briefly, the four objectives of the project are:

- to build the capacity of community institutions to enable planning, management and maintenance of a range of activities crucial to drought mitigation and household food security;
- to achieve sustainable farming systems, paying particular attention to crop and variety mix, soil fertility, soil moisture conservation and tillage practices;
- to improve water harvesting and utilisation technologies and practices for domestic, livestock and cultivation purposes;
- to raise incomes, by developing market linkages and improving the distribution of income earning opportunities throughout the year, particularly during the 'hungry season'.

The community participatory planning process involved three sets of actors in programme design: project field staff; district and field level staff from MAFF; and the community. This initiated a process which the project is now trying to further, to ensure that all three sets of actors stay fully involved in decision-making and management of operational activities. The idea is to demonstrate different ways of working at all levels within the programme and then to provide the training and operational support to ensure that these are institutionalised. This upholds the notion that a participatory project should have internally participatory modes of decision-making and that, as far as possible, it should encourage the greater use of such methods by

the government agencies with which it is collaborating. For instance, the training in PRA provided by the programme is helping MAFF extension staff to be more flexible in developing demand-driven extension programmes of their own.

Regular internal meetings take place at which staff actively discuss what is happening in the project and reach agreement on how to respond to issues identified. An annual review and planning exercise is also held. This involves most of the project staff, as well as CARE staff external to the project who play a supporting role. Using cards posted on the wall, the previous year's activities are reviewed and measured against intentions. This feeds into the operational plan for the following year. All activities, broken down into their constituent tasks, are then listed and plotted on a time line. This allows priorities and the linkages between activities to be clearly established. After this, tasks are allocated to individuals, so that all staff are aware of responsibilities for the following year. This exercise, which CARE has used in other complex, process projects in Zambia, assists in keeping track of what is happening and trying to juggle the often contrasting demands of: meeting targets; demonstrating cost-effectiveness to multiple donors; and being flexible enough to respond to events and unforeseen circumstances in the field.

Most, but not all, of CARE's six field staff who work on the agricultural component of the LFSP are trained to diploma level. They are supported by three staff members who are trained to graduate level (the project manager, a deputy who has natural resource management expertise, and a training officer). This means that staff with higher academic training and analytical skills actually reach field level where, if they also have an orientation in participatory methods, they can articulate issues with farmers. CARE staff also play the role of backstopping MAFF extension staff in the field. For example, CARE has assisted MAFF, and its fledgling provincial farming systems research team, to carry out joint assessment activities in areas in which CARE will not be working.

Whereas it is too early to say how successfully CARE's approach might be replicated within the Ministry, it should be noted that the extension service has at least an equivalent number of diploma level staff at district level. Indeed, across the two agricultural districts in which CARE's agricultural programme now extends, the only additional graduate CARE has is the training officer. At this stage the project is not making claims about what staff levels are actually required to run a district level extension service, but it is showing that fewer staff are required than MAFF presently employs. What is important, though, is for their skills to be upgraded and the methodologies with which they operate to be substantially altered. So far, in the two districts in which MAFF has begun to try out CARE's VMC approach for seed multiplication purposes (see reference at end of section 5), the Ministry is not seeking to adjust its staffing levels.

Four of the six current CARE field staff are women. This has helped to ensure that women's concerns are articulated and included in all major programme activities, and that women are represented and participate actively in all community level fora and committees.

Community Institutional capacity: building

There are two fundamental tests for any project purporting to contribute to the improvement of people's lives. The first is whether a project is able to show any beneficial impact during its own lifetime. The second is whether such impact is durable beyond the project's lifetime. The word 'sustainability' is frequently used nowadays, but it remains an extremely vague and ill-defined term. One problem with the word sustainability is that it suggests that something persists without changing. What is really required is that a set of skills which are adaptable to different circumstances should be developed. If, through project activities, people gain the learning, analytical, planning and organisational skills and capacities which enable them to develop more direction over their lives, then the benefits of the project may be considered to be 'sustainable' in the best sense of the word.

The major thrust of the CARE programme lies in the development of community institutions and capacity. This is critical to ensuring the continuation of project activities beyond the lifetime of the programme itself. The formation and consolidation of community institutions is also the vehicle through which:

- people participate in project activities;
- the priorities of households are identified and addressed;
- the capacity of individuals to improve their livelihoods and food security status is enhanced;
- the programme is able to reach significant numbers of households across a large area with relatively few staff;
- project activities are planned, managed, monitored and evolve; and
- communities have the potential to procure services on their own.

Over the past two agricultural seasons (1994-95 and 1995-96), considerable time and energy has been invested in establishing partnerships with community groups in a way which ensures the participation of most members of the community. The LFSP has facilitated the formation of on-farm seed groups and Village Management Committees and helped lay the foundation for seed and water management schemes (see Box 1). It supports VMCs through the provision of leadership and management training. It also provides technical training to the farmer extension facilitators which the VMCs select. If members of a VMC subsequently encounter production problems, CARE will provide further advice. In forthcoming seasons, CARE expects to lay greater emphasis on marketing, assisting VMCs

to find markets for surplus production and to develop linkages with outside institutions.

A key aspect of the activities of the farmer extension facilitators, most of whom are appointed by a group of VMCs, is that their work is voluntary (though they do of course benefit from the seed scheme themselves and, because they receive technical training from CARE, both their knowledge and status within the community have risen). This means that they are accountable to the VMCs, not to CARE. The issue of incentives for community facilitators is often a thorny problem. Facilitators turned down bicycles, which the project was prepared to provide, as they said this would create local jealousies. What hoped, is that if the facilitators continue to play an important role in the community and begin to assist with activities such as marketing, then the VMCs and their federated form the AMCs will begin to make arrangements with the facilitators to remunerate them. This has happened in one other project in Zambia, where one of the authors was involved in training community facilitators.

A difficult issue always arises with the formation of new village institutions and that is how they will relate to existing institutions and traditional leaders. For the most part the CARE programme has gained the support of traditional leaders. It began its activities at a time when a series of droughts had ravaged the area and had left most households with little food and no seed. Thus there was little danger that the seed and water activities of the programme would not be valued. It is, though, up to villages themselves to agree on the formal role of the village headman within the VMC; whether or not he is a member he would certainly be aware of VMC activities.

Part of the aim of the VMC is that, as a 'new' institutional form, it should be able to introduce to the community different ways of dealing with matters of mutual concern. One of the best votes of confidence for the approach came from a meeting with one of the VMCs in April 1996, during the visit of an evaluator. The group was asked by this person how they had most benefited from CARE. They all agreed that the first benefit had been the seed CARE had brought, which had enabled them to produce food again. Here two women noted that:

'CARE doesn't choose who gets the seed, it is given to the rich and also to the poor, whereas Lima Bank used to give loans only to people with oxen and big fields.'

Even more heartening was the broad agreement as to the second most important benefit. This was perceived to be the fact that the villagers now have 'the knowledge of how to organise themselves'. One woman, probably in her early 30s, stated that since she was born, she had not seen any organisation before the VMC that could meet and solve problems in the village. What was noticeable about the group was the extent to which a range of people contributed to the discussion, and that women participated as easily as men (Field notes 16/4/

96). All could talk about the future water supply activity in which the VMC planned to engage.

This group is still probably unusual. Other groups have had different experiences. Talking with another group, project staff found that a village seed store successfully established was unutilised at planting time. The reason was that the chairman of the VMC, on whose property the seed store was built, was suspected of being a witch. He had been elected chairman by other villagers because they thought he would be dangerous otherwise, (pers. comm., project staff). Disfunctionality such as this has become more apparent as CARE has attempted to assist VMCs to develop resources and activities of their own (rather than just receiving project seed from extension facilitators).

These varying outcomes demonstrate how important it will be for project field staff to keep in touch with communities' VMC experiences, both positive and negative. Staff must seek to utilise the more successful and optimistic outcomes as islands of hope which help address the problems and concerns of those villages where success is harder to come by (as they are more shackled by their culture and history). Box 2 lists a series of points raised by LFSP field staff when asked

what they felt had been the key innovations of the community capacity building strategy thus far.

Having come through the early stages of the process, the project must now carefully review its strategy on relations with community institutions. This season considerable effort has been devoted to developing a community self-monitoring system for assessing household livelihood trends. VMCs have been provided with record books and VMC secretaries have been trained in data collection. So far the results have been mixed: some villages have recorded valuable information which shows that the seed scheme has had a significant short-term impact on food security; other villages have been slow to record data.

At the same time, the project has been putting together a baseline survey, with information largely being collected by project staff in one day 'PRA' exercises. There are points at which data collected through self-monitoring activities overlaps with the baseline data. Where this has been cross-checked, the self-monitoring data is proving more accurate. One reason for this is that, in some cases, villagers under-estimated yields, assets and their food stocks in the baseline survey for fear that CARE would depart if their situation had seemed to improve too much. When VMC members were collecting information the answers provided were more accurate as the respondents knew that the data collectors were already familiar with their households and situations.

This, then, indicates that data collected through self-monitoring information is likely to be more reliable and trustworthy than CARE collected data. The problem is, though, that the VMCs have not played a significant role in designing the self-monitoring surveys. As a result they still see the information they collect as belonging to CARE and being for CARE's use (Ward, 1997). However, when they have collected data communities do not want CARE to take the record books away. In one case, a well-recorded book was 'lost' by CARE staff when it was taken away for the data to be recorded, so an *in situ* method for recording or copying this data is required. VMCs have also complained to CARE field staff that they do not see the results of information they collect, so field staff have identified the problem of communities lack of ownership of data as an issue to be addressed in the next annual plan period.

Box 2. Community capacity-building: LFSP innovations

- Farmers are participating in everything the project does.
- Farmers organise themselves into groups with people they feel they can work with – they decide on the size and boundaries of the group.
- The village management committees (VMCs) select farmer extension facilitators (FEFs), whose role is to work with VMC members. Messages disseminated by the FEFs are based on an agenda agreed with farmers. Farmers also go to the facilitators with problems encountered during the season, and the facilitators communicate with CARE (e.g. on problems experienced during 1995–96 with aphids on cowpeas).
- FEFs in some areas now write letters to CARE, which are delivered by someone going to town.
- FEFs help with seed delivery and repayment; CARE staff do not need to go into the field to collect the seed.
- Each area has an overall committee (area committee) formed through a local federation of the VMCs. These have been formed so far in most of last season's operational areas: Mandia, Katapazhi, Malimbuluti, Musokotwane (2), Milango, Sinde (2), Siakasipa (2), Makunka, Sihumbwa.
- Groups are more formal – they have registers and clear lists of members – and are much more effective. The groups are also inclusive, i.e. in most villages nearly all households are members of the VMC.
- Some VMCs have reorganised themselves; when they grow too large, they split and form two groups.
- Villages which were on the margins of the areas in which CARE was operating last year are now forming VMCs of their own accord. They register members, elect a committee and then come to the CARE extension officer to be registered.
- Field officers take ideas about ways of addressing problems identified by farmers back to the farmers to discuss them and agree on whether the idea might be tried out and, if so, how.
- Field staff are part of the planning process for new ideas and are therefore keen to see these work. They also have enough information to discuss how to adapt new ideas in the field.
- Field days focus on comparing 'good' and 'bad' practices and discussing the differences and reasons for these.

5 PARTNERSHIP FORMALISATION WITH THE MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE

In the 1995–96 season, when the LFSP began to expand its seed multiplication activities, there was some concern on the part of MAFF staff at district level about CARE's activities. This was despite CARE staff briefing MAFF staff and involving the camp extension officers in the initial appraisal exercises. However, as the VMC activities and the seed scheme picked up during this second year, camp staff quickly found out that CARE was a resource rather than a threat. The two sides started to formulate joint work plans which sought to build on both parties'

efforts. For instance, joint (MAFF and CARE) farmer meetings organised through VMCs were conducted and CARE and MAFF field staff shared topics during training. Further, camp staff started to address problems which farmers had articulated during CARE PRA exercises as part of their own extension activities. CARE also assisted camp staff with technical backstopping where necessary and, in some cases, CARE offered transport to camp staff. CARE also made it possible for extension activities to take place in distant places, or in camp areas without MAFF staff. These activities were led by facilitators appointed by the communities and jointly trained by MAFF and CARE.

In spite of the apparent harmony at field level, at district level, the DAO in particular was still unclear about how to view the relationship with CARE. The meetings which had been held with him to discuss CARE activities did not seem to help solve this problem, since the DAO and his staff had no clear mechanism or authority to incorporate extension activities conducted by any other organisation into their own. This problem was eventually solved with the assistance of the Provincial Agricultural Officer (PAO). The PAO was the Programme Coordinator of a newly launched, IFAD-sponsored Southern Province Household Food Security Project. This was a nationally approved programme which was designed to be driven by a participatory methodology.⁴ The PAO recognised the value of CARE — which already had experience with participation and whose own work had been discussed and agreed with him from the very beginning - in helping him implement the IFAD project. He therefore provided staff at District level with the mandate to cooperate with CARE.

Encouraged by this gesture, LFSP organised two partnership workshops with the DAO's office in Livingstone. Senior staff from both partner organisations were involved. In the first workshop, the concept of partnership was elaborated and in the second, clear terms of partnership were worked out. Areas of common interest (vision) were discussed, roles and responsibilities assigned and resource contributions discussed. Using partnership principles and strategies in this way was breaking new ground for MAFF and the project, as neither had had experience of working through a relationship this thoroughly before. One of the major issues to come out of these workshops was an agreement on how to work with the VMCs (the value of which had, by this stage, been recognised by the Ministry as well). Shortly after, a further successful workshop was held with the DAO's office in Kalomo to agree on collaborative mechanisms in the Kalomo west area.

The benefits of these ongoing attempts to establish constructive working relationships with the District offices can be seen in the following:

- Most camp staff fully understand CARE's approach and activities, more so following the partnership workshops and agreements at District level; they now feel 'authorised' to participate fully in the programme activities.

- District staff no longer see CARE as competition but as partners with similar goals, and to a great extent as a resource - CARE, for instance, has facilitated participatory needs assessment exercises used to plan extension activities outside CARE areas.
- MAFF has officially invited CARE to train its staff in PRA techniques (CARE has trained at least two MAFF staff from each of seven Districts, as well as the provincial farming systems research team). CARE is also frequently asked to provide training to MAFF staff in Community Based Organisation (CBO) formation and management.
- MAFF has formally adopted the CARE facilitated VMC structure as a legitimate CBO for the purposes of delivering extension services. Following training from CARE, other district offices are establishing similar structures in their own districts.
- CARE has been invited by MAFF to sit on the District Agricultural Committee (DAC), the ASIP steering committee at District level.

Since these workshops, and since the training conducted by CARE of some staff from other districts, MAFF have in fact begun to go even further in adopting some elements of CARE's approach. In the seed multiplication component of the GRZ/IFAD Southern Province Household Food Security Project, CARE's VMC model is now being tried out in two other districts in Southern Province, Siavonga and Gwembe, outside the operational area of the LFSP. In both these districts the aim is to replicate CARE's community institutional approach as much as possible, using the MAFF camp officers to undertake the organisational work (Russell, 1996).

6 LESSONS LEARNED

Decentralisation of decision-making

Despite initial efforts by CARE to involve MAFF in project activities, the working relationship between the two organisations was awkward at the outset. District level staff were unable to participate freely because there was no clear policy framework within which they could commit themselves to working with CARE. In the District's view it was not clear what mandate CARE had to get involved in extension work in their area. It took the PAO's directive and a lot of CARE initiative to get the DAOs involved (CARE was already mandated by virtue of its contract with Government and donors).

A clear lesson here is the need to improve the effectiveness of MAFF's local decision-making. The Provincial and District levels must be able to develop specific goals and objectives appropriate to their circumstances. They also require the framework and capacity to formulate relevant extension strategies to achieve these objectives. These strategies and objectives may be informed - but not dictated — by national-level policies and pronouncements. On the other hand, perseverance by NGOs and other bodies is important. It was important for CARE to understand the rigidities

in MAFF and its hierarchical management style before it could devise an effective strategy to enhance cooperation and bring about synergy between MAFF and CARE programme activities.

Partnership and not 'turfism'

The national extension service does not have the resources to cover all those who need it, nor are its approaches appropriate to achieve maximum impact. This, together with the fact that the Government has already begun to privatise some of the services offered by MAFF, means that there is plenty of room for other actors. Indeed, the Government has invited the private sector, and especially NGOs such as CARE, to help provide some of the services formerly monopolised by MAFF. However, for this actually to take place certain mechanisms need to be in place. CARE found that a clear partnership strategy was necessary to facilitate working relations with MAFF. CARE also learnt that both sides must have a common understanding of what 'partnership' is all about (hence the workshops). When roles and responsibilities for each organisation are clearly defined, staff work with ease, freely participating in 'programme' activities. The most important thing becomes getting things done to help the farmer, rather than to 'protect one's turf'.

Clarifying things for participating communities

The existence of parallel extension activities in the same community is a waste of resources. It can also be terribly confusing to the participating community. It is therefore clear that anyone involved in extension activities needs to work closely with MAFF, the primary supplier. The lesson learned is that all those involved in extension should develop a coordinated programme for a particular area, in conjunction with the community, so that everyone, including the community, is aware of their roles and responsibilities. This exercise should start with joint appraisals and planning (CARE and MAFF did a needs assessment exercise together for MAFF programme development in new areas, but used CARE findings in areas in which CARE was already working to avoid duplicating efforts). Farmers should not be put in a situation in which they start to choose one organisation over the other. Rather, different organisations should play different, complementary roles.

Importance of the participatory approach and CBOs

CARE uses participatory approaches at all stages of project activities, from diagnostic stages, through to programme planning, implementation and monitoring and evaluation. Indeed, at some stages of the process the community takes primary responsibility for an activity. Working with the VMCs ensures full participation of the whole community in an organised and systematic manner. CARE has encouraged a participatory

Box 3. Achievements of LFSP and lessons learned

Achievements

- Community organisation has taken place. People can now work together and can solve conflicts, at a community level, on their own.
- The training that has taken place is having an impact: differences are emerging between farmers in CARE areas and non-CARE areas. For example, yields for farmers in non-CARE seed schemes last season were lower than those for farmers in CARE areas. This was because the CARE staff sat down with farmers to discuss crop management issues affecting production.
- Farmers in seed groups train each other if someone cannot attend a training session - the mutual accountability of the seed group members for returning seed loans has helped bring this about.
- There has already been an improvement in food security in just one season.⁵ Farmers are calling some crop varieties after CARE field workers and the beer parties, which can be held again now that there is more sorghum grain, are called 'CARE International discos'.
- Other organisations see the CARE extension approach as being extremely effective and are seeking to use CARE to reach farmers.
- Working through community organisations allow much larger farmer:extension worker ratios. Moreover, despite working with many more farmers each, the CARE staff have a closer relationship with them than do the MAFF extension workers.
- Large-scale seed distribution was achieved cheaply and effectively in one season. For the crops most broadly disseminated - cowpeas, sorghum - no further distribution of present varieties in last season's areas is needed.
- Supervisory staff (coordinators) visit farmers in the field to see what is happening, instead of just visiting the camp officer at his/her home or office, as frequently occurs in the government extension services.
- The project has been able to integrate different activities in the field.
- The CARE 'team' has been able to work well together, jointly developing an annual programme.

Lessons learned

- Farmers are extremely responsive when they participate at all levels of field activities.
- Farmer-to-farmer extension is much more effective than conventional extension, *when the farmers are well organised*.
- Field staff are given much greater latitude and capacity to think for themselves and problem-solve in their own areas. They respond well to this opportunity rather than always seeking for the manager to tell them what to do.

management style within the VMCs themselves, in particular to ensure that women are able to participate. This style also encourages commitment on the part of the community, a necessary prerequisite for continuity of community-based activities after the lifetime of the project. What is important is that CARE's field staff remain flexible and are able to continue to encourage the positive achievements of the more successful CBOs, which are starting to engage in activities beyond those facilitated by CARE, using these as models for the more constrained VMCs.

The achievements of the LFSP and early lessons from its experience, as perceived by its original field staff are summarised in Box 3.

In addition to these comments of the field staff, two other points can be noted here on the CBO strategy.

The first is the need for staff within the project to stay focused on reinforcing the roles of the VMCs and AMCs, and handing more responsibility over to these institutions, even when it might be easier for CARE to do things directly. Second, CARE needs to minimise an extractive style of information collecting, even for monitoring data required by donors, and maximise the ability of VMCs to analyse and use data.

7 CONCLUSION

The National Extension service in Zambia has long been criticised for being ineffective and unsustainable. Its shortcomings are of both a resource and a methodological nature. However, were cost-effective methodological approaches to be available, the resource constraints would be much reduced. CARE has shown that three staff can manage an effective extension programme involving over 6,800 farmers (and that six staff can serve 9,600 farmers). This demonstrates the potential for improvement.

The CARE experience reviewed here also underlines the value of NGO/government alliances. If government recognises the advantages NGOs have in undertaking capacity-building at community level and developing farmer-to-farmer extension networks, then it can reduce its own role at field level and concentrate on developing a cadre of well-trained and well-equipped technical support persons at District and Provincial level.

To improve its cost-effectiveness, the Ministry of Agriculture must be flexible and place greater emphasis on encouraging Provincial and District level initiatives, rather than trying to enforce a national approach, which has so far proved to be cumbersome and inappropriate to many situations. The national extension service must open up and learn from others. With the current policy of liberalisation and encouragement of the private sector, no longer does any single agency have a monopoly on the provision of extension services. This requires a change in attitude on the part of the Ministry of Agriculture. It must rationalise its resources and concentrate on strategic matters where the impact of its resources will be most effective. A more accommodating and partnership-oriented attitude, especially at field level, would help the government extension service share the costs of providing services to farmers with other actors such as NGOs, input traders, marketeers (grain dealers) and commercial farmers (e.g. through outgrowers' schemes). Such partnerships, which operate through participatory farmer organisations, are the way of the future.

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ENDNOTES

1. Presentation by the Director of Extension at the ASIP planning meeting for 1996.
2. In the current restructuring of MAFF, Extension has been elevated to a Department, headed by a Director.
3. CARE staff receive higher salaries than MAFF staff but a considerable proportion of these salaries must be spent on housing which MAFF staff are allocated for nominal rent. Also, CARE's field staff operate only on short-term contracts, which are limited by funding availability, so they lack the job security of the government staff.
4. Several CARE national and international staff had in fact been involved in the design of the IFAD programme before they joined CARE.
5. Monitoring information so far shows that between 1994-95 and 1995-96 villages improved their food stocks by an average of between one to five months per household (Ward, 1997).

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