Analysing the integration of the Village Level Participatory Approach into the extension system in Benin

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Abstract
Training and Visits System (TVS) has been the cornerstone of the agricultural extension approach since 1985 in Benin. To better address the needs of farmers, the Village Level Participatory Approach (VLPA) was developed and tested with the support of the World Bank. This experimentation involved about 600 villages from 1999 to 2002. This paper tries to analyse strengths and weaknesses of the integrated approach based on its implementation in 17 villages in Bembereke district in northern Benin. The analysis shows that in the TVS, extension agents need great technical skills and knowledge on adult training while the VLPA call for better capability in group animation and survey. Extension was not a high priority in many villages according to the participatory planning. Moreover, with the exception of soil fertility, the other agricultural problems for which extension services are requested concerned only less than 36% of the villages. In order to increase the effectiveness of the integration of VLPA and TVS, the analysis and training capacity of existing extension agents needs to be reinforced and training topics should be decided on a case by case basis. A lot of care should also be taken when dealing with sensitive issues related to health, water and infrastructures for not burying extension.

Keywords: Benin, Extension, Integration, Training and Visits System, Village Level Participatory Approach

1. Introduction
Since the creation of the Regional Action Centres for Rural Development in 1985 in Benin, many extension approaches and systems were implemented. Some of these approaches are the (i) integrated rural development approach, (ii) the integrated rural development approach that has been improved with the Training and Visits System (TVS), and (iii) the professional extension based on the national extension system (Tossou, 1996). Since 1985, the TVS has been the cornerstone of agricultural extension approach. Its use TVS helped particularly to improve cotton crop production, which became the most important cash crop in the country. However, the farmers are not satisfied of the extension activities because their real needs were not taken into account. To better address their needs, the Village Level Participatory Approach (VLPA) was developed and applied in Benin with the support of the World Bank. This experimentation involved 600 villages from 1999 to 2002. A plan is made to apply this approach in the whole country (MAEP, 2004). This paper aims at analysing the strengths and weaknesses of the integration of VLPA into the TVS.

2. Theoretical background
Integrated rural development projects which have been implemented during the 70s and 80s did not satisfy the expectations of the backers. Among several reasons put forward to explain that, there is no effective involvement of the beneficiaries in the development process. All the
specialists agree that the success of any sustainable development programme is widely linked to the real participation of the actors of a system (Axinn, 1997). From then on, farmer participation at the different levels of the development process became a major challenge to take up.

The participation of local communities to extension programmes is often perceived as a way of increasing their chance of success especially for the resolution of the problems of the poorest strata. It keeps up the communication between the actors who are the researchers, the farmers and the extension agents. This partnership is characterised by a mutual confidence that creates a social environment favourable to the generation of effective, sustainable and large impact results (Schmidt et al., 1998). In many developing countries like Benin, efforts are undergoing to make the national extension systems - still based on the TVS - more participative.

3. Methodology
The Village Level Participatory Approach was experienced in many districts in northern Benin. The analysis is based on the case study of Bembereke district. Structured interviews with the Pilot Rural Support Project (PAMR-Borgou) leaders, extension agents, village leaders and farmers were carried out. Participant observations were made during meetings and activities in the villages. The activities planning tables of 17 villages involved in the project were analysed. Percentages of agricultural extension issues in framers’ priority problems were calculated for each village. Villages were grouped in percentage ranges. The number of villages by percentages interval is presented in a histogram form. The percentages of villages concerned by each extension issue included in priority problems were also calculated and analysed.

4. Results

4.1. Brief description of the extension approach

❖ TVS as cornerstone of agricultural extension approach in Benin
The TVS aims at transferring agricultural technologies to individual farmers. The most active farmers in the system are those who belong to the Contact Groups (CG). These groups are created by the extension field agents according to the proximity of farms and the affinity of farmers. The extension agents are in charge of popularising agricultural technologies by demonstrating them and training the CG’s members. These field agents are trained and retrained by technicians specialised in various matters such as crop production, animal breeding, etc. and an administrative supervisor whom they account for. Researchers train the technicians frequently on new technologies and acquaint themselves with farmer needs during the training sessions. The field intervention strategy is based on fortnight planning and carrying out of trainings and farm visit activities. According to Tossou (1996) this system is highly hierarchical, directive and not very flexible. This constitutes a locking factor to a real participation of the farmers or the orientation of the services towards their needs. However, the approach helps in improving especially the production of cotton that became the most important cash crop for exportation. But at the same time, farmers lacked increasing interest vis-à-vis extension services, which were not really oriented towards their problems solving. The Village Level Participatory Approach is supposed to improve the system through a better involvement of local communities.

❖ The integration of the Village Level Participatory Approach
The aim of the Pilot Rural Support Project was to improve rural communities’ capacity to better manage their socio-economic environment (Chabeuf et al. 2002). The objective of the Village Level Participatory Approach is the development of auto-promotion capabilities in all the sectors, i.e. agriculture, heath, infrastructures, etc. VLPA process involves all the socio-professional groups at a village level and leads to problems diagnosis, priorities setting, solutions
identification and planning of actions relative to all the socio-economic life: agriculture, education, health, transport, culture, security, environment, etc. The global diagnosis is completed by continuous and deep diagnosis that leads to extension themes identification.

4.2. Agricultural technology problems in farmers’ priorities

- **The weak representation of agricultural technology concerns**
The following histogram displays the number of villages by interval of percentages. The percentages are the proportion of agricultural extension issues in framers’ priority problems.

![Histogram showing the number of villages by interval of percentages of agricultural extension issues in priority problems.]

Often, only 10-20% of priority problems concern agricultural extension even though agriculture is the main activity and source of income in the study area. Extension was not often a high priority according to the participatory planning.

- **Percentage of villages concerned by extension issues**
The following table presents extension issues included in priority problems and percentages of villages concerned.

**Table:** Extension issues included in priority problems and percentage of villages concerned

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Extension issues</th>
<th>Percentages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1- Soil fertility</td>
<td>67.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2- Cereals conservation</td>
<td>35.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3- Bean attacks on farm</td>
<td>35.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4- Yam conservation</td>
<td>29.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5- Lack of improved varieties</td>
<td>23.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6- Maize attacks on farm</td>
<td>23.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7- Vegetables production techniques</td>
<td>11.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8- Cotton flower fall</td>
<td>05.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9- Mango trees attacks</td>
<td>05.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10- Yam seed production</td>
<td>05.88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Apart from soil fertility problems, all the other issues constitute a priority for less than 36% of the villages. Regardless this difference in priorities orders, same extension topics were systematically developed in all the villages. This points out the divergences between VLPA and TVS.
5. Analysis

5.1. Strengths of the approach

Since 2002, a decentralisation process is going on in Benin. The main expectation of the reform is that people take into account the development of their area. In such a context VLPA is a valuable tool. It could lead the village communities progressively to a dynamic cycle of identifying their problems, prospecting solutions, making decisions and taking actions for solving them.

5.2. Weaknesses of the approach

❖ **Differences in skills requirements between VLPA and TVS**

VLPA tended to reinforce the resource management and auto-promoting capacities within the rural communities. In contrary, TVS focused on individual farms and targeted increasing the productivity and income through the transfer and diffusion of technologies. Both systems require from extension agents different methodology and professional capability. As argued by Moumouni (2000), while the TVS agents need solid technical skills and knowledge on adult training, the VLPA call for better capability in group animation and survey.

❖ **Risks and requirements in integrating VLPA into TVS**

Extension concerns are lost due to urgent problems related to health, water, etc. Moreover, all the extension topic should not be developed in all the villages of the region like before with the TVS.

6. Conclusion

The analysis seems to confirm Lühe (1998) that any attempt to confer a participative character on TVS could not change anything and synergy effects may be difficult to get. To improve the effectiveness of the integration of VLPA and TVS:

- analysis and training capacity of existing extension agents should be reinforced and

- training topics should be decided on a case by case basis. This requires changes in the way the TVS was carried out. Lot of care should be taken when dealing with sensitive issues related to health, water and infrastructures for not burying the extension in more urgent problems.

References


