

ET07

## Participation: a dilemma for extension agents

### Key Points:

- 1** Ethiopia has a participatory approach to extension (PADETES) that includes NRM
- 2** This participatory approach is limited by a history of coercion by the state
- 3** Extension agents have competing roles and incentives that may undermine NRM
- 4** Attempts to change these roles and incentives are affected by resource constraints

This Briefing is one of a series produced jointly by the Forum for Social Studies (Ethiopia), Centro de Experimentação Florestal (Mozambique) and the University of Sussex (UK). Each is designed to summarise research findings and encourage feedback. The Briefing is part of the 'Marena' research project, funded by the UK's Department for International Development.

In Ethiopia, participatory approaches to agricultural extension have gained widespread formal acceptance. The official government extension methodology is the Participatory Development Training and Extension System (PADETES). This is one of several approaches prevalent in the country, all of which stress a 'farmer-centred' focus.

Gaps between participatory ideals and realities have been noted in many countries. But Ethiopia faces particular challenges. A donor-influenced participatory agenda exists in the context of historically hierarchical relations both between government and farmers and within government. In addition, technical and resource constraints are great. The complexities of these challenges, and their implications for the NRM sector, are outlined below

### The emergence of participatory extension

Government support to agricultural extension in Ethiopia began in the 1930s, but was small scale until the late 1960s when donor supported agricultural development projects brought about an increase in training and support to extension. Under the Derg, government prioritisation of state and collective farms led to a neglect of the smallholder sector. However, with the change of government and increased donor attention to Ethiopia, the concern is again with support to smaller scale farmers.

PADETES has been formally in place since 1995. It is the responsibility of the Ministry of Agriculture. Extension agents, known as Development Agents (DAs), work directly with farmers. Over the last two years, with donor support, there has been an increase in the number of DAs throughout the country. However, each DA is still expected to reach about 1,000 households. Sometimes this can be as many as 1,400. Few have any transport, even in difficult and inaccessible terrain.

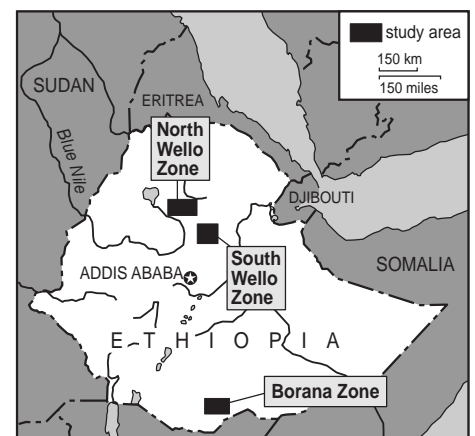
In theory, the DA consults with a 'community planning team', made up of representatives of all sections of rural society; women, youth, elders and so on. Plans for both on-farm demonstration and community-based soil and water conservation (SWC) activities are then drawn up.

### Participation in practice

In practice, participatory ideals are difficult to realise. Many of the problems facing participatory extension arise from the problematic position of the DAs. These are usually both members of the communities in which they work, and representatives of the government. They are potential distributors of benefits for farmers yet may play a controlling or even coercive role. They work with limited resources.

### A history of coercion

In the past, DAs were the frontline implementers of the government policy of 'mass mobilisation', in which peasants undertook SWC activities under threat of sanction. For farmers, memories of such coercion have not necessarily gone. This is perpetuated by the fact that they may still be expected to contribute up to twenty days per year for 'community participation' without reward. In theory, communities devise their own plans. But this is a rather different kind of participation to that envisaged by the donors. There are fines and even threats of loss of land for those farmers who do not 'participate'.



For DAs, the 'community' is closely identified with formal structures of government at local level; the *Kebele* Administration (KA), and below this household based 'Development teams', or *Mengistawi Buden*<sup>1</sup>. However, such structures do not necessarily represent all interest groups within a locality.

Plans to involve less powerful or articulate community members are seldom realised. For example, partly because few DAs are women, men alone are consulted on farming matters. Among male DAs and their supervisors, there is a feeling that even the few female DAs that exist may be too many. They stress that farmers are men, despite women's active role in farming (see *Briefing* ET13).

### Consultation or quotas?

The DAs' incentive system is built around the need to persuade farmers to adopt 'packages', usually of improved seed and fertiliser. Their relatively meagre pay can be supplemented with evidence of uptake of packages. They are therefore most likely to work with those 'model' farmers who show an interest in such technologies. This is at odds with notions that farmers should determine their own needs, and confirms a view that in fact the government knows best.

The choice of packages available is not always appropriate to the particular agro-ecological and economic conditions of an area. There tends to be a bias towards high rainfall areas. In areas of greater rainfall variability and uncertainty, the risks for farmers are much greater. Critically too, having met their quotas, DAs then must recover loans, even if the farmer has had a poor harvest. Individual DAs may be very sympathetic to the needs of farmers during

such times. However, loan recovery is also a measure of their success. This compounds the problematic position of DAs as both ally of the farmer and instrument of coercion.

### Proposed changes to PADETES

That the PADETES system is intimately tied up with the delivery of technical inputs is paradoxical. However, some external donors are trying to break this linkage. For example, the British NGO, SOS Sahel, operating in North Wello, is working with the government to make PADETES more responsive to farmer needs. A new version, Participatory Extension Planning (PEP) is intended to move away from the idea of quota delivery. Local institutional acceptance of the new scheme may, however, be closely related to the resource constraints.

### Competing agendas

In addition to their work with extension packages, DAs have other work in their role as frontline representatives of the government. In addition to SWC-related activities, this may extend from tax collection to the implementation of food-for-work (FFW) activities supported by the World Food Programme.

Decisions about which of these competing demands to prioritise are based on pragmatic assessments. DAs are understandably less interested in their participatory value than in the resources attached to them. For example, FFW may enable the DAs to consolidate their influential position within a community. Being on a very large scale, it may also seem like a more effective way of addressing immediate problems of hunger and poverty.

## Concluding comments

Understanding the success or failure of participatory plans requires full comprehension of the institutional context. This means getting to grips with the complexities of the social context of those who are expected to participate, as well as their past experience of external intervention. But of equal importance are the constraints and incentives of the individuals charged with implementing the plans.

For example, how many people is it realistic to expect a DA to work with? Is the work of DAs in the NRM sector compatible with their work elsewhere? Such questions are often overlooked in the development of participatory methodologies.

<sup>1</sup>*Mengistawi buden* means literally 'governmental team', indicating that at the local level, government and 'the community' cannot be neatly separated.

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