Report: Improving performance of Ministries of Agriculture in the field: recent insights from Africa

Speakers:
- Rebecca Kent, Concern’s work at district level in Tanzania and with marginal farmers in Zambia;
- Sarah Grant, Engineers without Borders — on their work with the Ministry of Food and Agriculture in Ghana; and
- Colin Poulton, SOAS, University of London, on field performance of ministries of agriculture in Kenya and Malawi.

Chair: Steve Wiggins, Overseas Development Institute

Introduction
With funds flowing again to African agriculture, what can be done to help make Ministries of Agriculture more effective in the field? Is funding the issue, or is their use more important?

What, in any case, should be the roles of the ministry at the district level? And thus what roles should NGOs and private enterprise play?

The meeting saw three presentations of evidence from the field: a welcome counter to the voluminous debates on aid effectiveness that can become overly preoccupied with administration in capital cities, with scant regard for operational realities.

Presentations
Rebecca Kent reported on two experiences of Concern, whose priority lies with marginal farmers. In Tanzania, 75% of the agricultural is disbursed to Local Government Authorities, where planning begins at the community level with the farmers, subsequently aggregated into Ward and District level agricultural development plans. There were problems with the approach, however. Funds arrived late, spending diverted to travel allowances, per diems and training, and a tendency for a high number of small, disparate projects. Farmer’s voices were not always heard — their need for infrastructure was apparently unattended.

Improvements that were being tried included prompt disbursements, allowing funds that arrive late to be carried over financial years to allow projects to be completed, and new guidelines for larger projects to improve strategic thinking and coordination. Concern was also working on tracking the budget.

Concern also looked at government support to marginal, female farmers in Western Province of Zambia. Not only are these farmers poor with few assets, but they face geographical disadvantages of the remoteness of the Province from Lusaka, and poor natural resources with relatively infertile sandy uplands, lowlands prone to flooding, and livestock disease. The ministry of agriculture hardly had any contact with them, partly since the national priorities did not correspond to those of the marginal, women farmers. The ministry provides fertiliser subsidies that do not reach poorer farmers, and seeks to promote farming as a commercial enterprise: ‘farming as a business, not a way of life’, a challenge for isolated communities.

On the other hand, health services, schools and emergency relief after floods did reach many of them — prompting the question of whether agricultural support to the marginal farmers might better be routed through the ministry of health or education.
the Concern campaign document and then a Gender and Development paper based on the same work.

http://www.concern.net/en/resources/responding-needs-marginal-farmers-review-selected-district-agricultural-development-plans-

http://www.concern.net/en/resources/women-marginal-farmers-speak-out

http://www.genderanddevelopment.org/display.asp?&K=002J1560&sort=SORT_DATE%2Fd&sf_01=KEYWORD&sf_02=CTITLE&sf_03=author&st_04=18&sf_04=volume&st_05=3&sf_05=issue&sf_06=cat_class&sf_07=BIC_QUAL_CODE&sf_08=pub_year&m=10&dc=11

Engineers without Borders (EwB), Canada\(^1\) has been working with the ministry of agriculture focused in the Northern Region of Ghana\(^\) for the last six years, reported Sarah Grant. EwB tries to find practical ways, in the field, to scale up promising innovations and practices. They follow a seven-step approach, iterating when needed:

- Understand performance;
- Identify good practice ['positive deviance']
- Package this in ways that it can be replicated economically;
- Try this with those agricultural officers not yet using the practice;
- Demonstrate field results;
- Be prepared then to meet demand for replication; and,
- Influence policy and projects based on what has been learned.

In Northern Region the issue was strengthening farmer groups and the repayment of loans they had received.

As EwB understood more about the ministry and its operations, it became increasingly clear that some of the more pressing problems lay in procedures that are laid down nationally, such as the rules for hiring and promoting field staff, and timely flows of cash to get on with work in the field. Hence EwB has been drawn to more thinking about national issues. There has been much emphasis recently on improving the ministry’s performance through budget support, joint sector working groups and reviews. The latter are making progress, getting beyond a tendency to blame all problems on 'lack of resources'.

EwB also appreciated from discussions at higher levels that it was easier to make progress locally when focusing on priorities recognised nationally, such as, in this case, the rice crop.

In conclusion, 5 things need to change within the Ministry:

1. Innovation on extension services. Go beyond crop production
2. Professional development of field staff
3. Effective management practices
4. Processes for planning, budgeting and learning
5. Decentralized power and resources

\(^1\) See http://www.ewb.ca/en/whatwedo/overseas/projects/agricultureghana.html
Colin Poulton outlined findings from research carried out in Kenya and Malawi into the functioning of the ministry in the field by members of the Future Agricultures Consortium. Four Districts had been covered in Kenya, three in Malawi, with contrasting levels of development.

What farmers wanted from the ministry in Kenya depended on their circumstances. In Nyeri South supply chains for commercial crops of tea, coffee, dairy and horticulture were already well established, so that technical advice that the ministry supplied met the farmers’ needs. In contrast, in less well developed Rachuonyo, the overwhelming need was to link farmers to markets for inputs, credit and outputs — and to combat the rampant local scourge of striga weed. Above all, farmers wanted to see extension workers in the field.

The Kenyan research threw up one surprising finding: the large majority of the staff of the ministry at District level were not in the field, but in the District headquarters or divisional offices, as these statistics on staff distribution in the four Districts show:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Office-based Professional</th>
<th>Administrative</th>
<th>Field Extension Workers in post (posts vacant)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rachuonyo (2007)</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nyeri South (2009)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eldoret W (2009)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** Data for 2/5 Divisions

These results were set within a political context that had seen the number of agricultural and rural ministries in Kenya proliferate from 3 to 9, while new Districts were also being created.

In Malawi, there were imbalances across Districts as well: one district had three times more graduates than the other two districts combined. Staff were heavily taken up by the administration of the fertiliser subsidy, with little time for other duties. Low wages undermined motivation and some staff did little, waiting for the opportunity to work on NGO projects where the pay was better.

It seemed that substantial improvements in performance will require greater staff accountability to their farmer clients and rewards based on performance. District managers need greater authority to reward hard work and more say on hiring and promotion. Decentralisation might increase stakeholder voice over budgeting and planning and raise efficiency — although it may do little for equity, given that marginal farmers have little voice in local affairs.

Links to reports on Future Agricultures work in this areas:

Democratic Politics and State Capacity Building: Ministries of Agriculture in Malawi and Kenya, Oct 2009:


The limits of decentralised governance: the case of agriculture in Malawi


Agricultural services and decentralisation in Kenya, June 2010
In sum, three things were clear:

- Ministries were weak in responding to farmer needs — since staff were inadequately rewarded for meeting local needs, were managed according to centralised policies and followed national policies that sometimes did not correspond with the local reality;
- The ministries operated top-down and were often top-heavy, in resources and focus — with too little attention to field performance; and,
- That providing useful agricultural services to marginal farmers may be difficult, but it is not clear that most ministries make a serious attempt to do so.

Discussion
Points raised in questions included:

- Whether community views could be made part of the assessment of ministry staff;
- How ministries of agriculture link to other ministries and the presidency or prime minister’s office;
- How marginal farmers can ever be reached; and,
- Whether when large multinational enterprises are engaged in the supply chain, performance improves.

Two key points were made in response by the speakers:

- The more promising avenues for improvement lies in forms of decentralisation that make the ministries more responsive to their clients, the farmers; and,
- There have been by now many pilots of reforms to find better ways of providing services to farmers: this experience needs to be documented, disseminated and lessons drawn.

Steve Wiggins, Chair, 4 December 2010, revised 8 December 2010