

Block Farming in Ghana and the political economy of agricultural extension

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What is Block Farming

- The Block Farming Programme was introduced into the Ghana agricultural extension services as a special presidential initiative of the late President John Atta Mills.
- The Block farming has four elements:
 - It is applied to a group of adjacent farmers who have agreed to farm their land uniformly applying the directives of the extension division. Or to farmers who are allocated land by the Ministry of Agriculture.
 - Inputs, seeds and hired labourers are released to farmers as a package to be paid in kind at the end of harvest in seed, which are acquired by the Ministry of Food and Agriculture.
 - Seed growers are also contracted by the Ministry and provided with similar packages repayable in seed that is released to the participating farmers.
 - Labourers are recruited from among the rural youth to ameliorate youth labour.

Neo-patrimonialism or agribusiness?

- The Block Farming Programme has been hailed by the NDC government as a solution to rural unemployment and the raising of farm yields.
- Its detractors have argued that this is merely a political ploy. Within some sections of the Ministry of Agriculture its failings are attributed to political factors, that result in politicians creating pressures for large numbers of farmers to be registered who are not in a position to repay the loans.
- Among farmers, there is much discontent about the terms of the Block Farming Programme, about input packages that are forced upon them and high rates of interest that result in them losing a lot of their crops.
- From the perspective of small farmers Block Farming does not appear as a programme of neo-patrimonialism (i.e. extending cheap subsidised inputs to farmers to win their support).

The framework

- What are the various factors that have influenced the emergence of Block Farming?
- How do these fit into the structures of agricultural extension and the agrarian political economy that has developed in Ghana?
- This political economy does not only have national but also international dimensions, and policies emerge out of a coalition of national and international interests.
- To attempt to understand these patterns we need to trace the development of extension in Ghana, and link the dominant policy concerns and changes to wider political economy interests.

Origins of extension in Ghana

- The agricultural extension services in Ghana have a relatively recent history emerging in the 1960s and 1970s (as in much of Africa).
- During most of the colonial period a general agricultural extension service did not exist. The food crop sector was largely ignored and colonial agricultural initiatives focused minimal agricultural resources on export crops, where some of the the functions of extension emerged. These included the regulation of swollen shoot and capsid disease that began to emerge in cocoa in the 1940s and 1950s and led to the search for new varieties, and control methods.
- It was not until the 1950s that a system of agricultural research stations addressing the major food crops began to emerge.
- In relation to the cocoa sector the main Department of Agriculture initiative comprised of organising co-operative societies.

Early independence period

- This continued within the early independence period in which the functions of extension were carried out by the United Ghana Farmers' Co-operative Council (UGFCC).
- During the early 1960s under the Nkrumah led Convention People's Party (CPP), the dominant political ideology was African Socialism, a blend of Fabian and Soviet socialism.
- The main focus in the food sector was on building state farms, and workers' brigades.
- In contrast, in the export sector (where the government maintained a monopsony over international cocoa trade through the Cocoa Marketing Board), the main emphasis was on promoting smallholder production of cocoa.
- Various other agri-industrial commodity sectors were promoted, such as in cotton, oil palm, etc.
- As a result agricultural extension became fractured and sector driven with various commodity sectors developing their own distinct extension services, which reflected different mandates and relations with farmers.

Following 1966 “pro-commonwealth” Coup

- In Ghana the coup makers handed back power to civilians in 1969 through parliamentary democratic elections that saw the Progress Party PP government come to power with Busia as Prime Minister.
- Anti-state farms political rhetoric
- a US inspired agricultural extension service was created.
- Private large capitalist estates promoted
- An extension service developed within the Ministry of Agriculture
- Government committed to supporting large-scale capitalist farmers under “trickle down” diffusion theory (Rogers) in Focus and Concentrate Programme.

US Extension Influences

- As in other African nations agriculture extension came under the influence of the US Land Grant system.
- Agricultural extension developed in the US in the early 20th century as a logical progression of the concept of university extension applied to agricultural colleges. This became institutionalised into formal agricultural policy in the 1910s as the federal government supported the development of agricultural extension by agricultural colleges supervised by the US Agricultural Department.
- As the US emerged as the leading superpower following the Second World War, reorganising the Third World through aid as part of the Truman Point Four Plan, support for agricultural extension services based on US models became a way of extending US influence within the former colonies of European powers.
- The basis of Land Grant agricultural extension was introduced into Africa with support from USAID and US foundations.

US Postwar agricultural policy: exit the small farmer

- in the period after the second world war agricultural extension in the USA focused on promoting the interests of larger more competitive farmers and promoting a technology treadmill of increasing financial investment in agricultural production and heavy use of inputs and mechanisation.
- Swanson and Claar (1984: 16) write:

“In [the USA] extension personnel were explicitly taught how to understand, and then work within, the power structure of local communities. Extension workers generally focused their efforts on the larger more progressive farmers because that is where progress could be made more rapidly. The assumption was that the new technology would trickle down to the smaller, lower access farmers. The result of this strategy, particularly since the second world war, had been a rapid decline in the number of farm operators, as the larger more efficient farmers adopt new technology (particularly labour-saving technology) and expand their farm operations. The smaller more efficient farmers were unable to compete in the market-place and were forced out of agricultural production.”

A different outcome in Africa

- Application of this same framework to Africa had different outcomes. Without a dynamic rapid expanding urban manufacturing sector, rural smallholders had no where to exit.
- As a consequence smallholders remained in production, resisting new technologies but surviving with increasing levels of poverty.
- New technologies did not perform as well as they were expected to perform under actual farm conditions and many of the estate farms underperformed or became bankrupt.
- By the 1970s the theory of urban bias (Lipton) had developed as a critique of agricultural policy, including extension.

The SMC Government and move to contract farming

- The PP failed to solve the mounting economic crisis and in 1972 was ousted by a coup which brought the Supreme Military Council (SMC) under Colonel Ignatius Acheampong to power.
- In early period SMC continued building the private estate agricultural sector alongside state investments in agriculture, particularly promoting the development of capitalist agriculture and rice farming in the northern sector, with heavy involvement of the top military cadre and bureaucracy in these investments.
- However, by the mid 1970s, the SMC had moved from nurturing a class of national capitalist farmers to attempting to engage multinational agribusiness in joint state-private sector enterprises.

Causes of changes in policy

- This change in emphasis resulted from the failure of Ghanaian capitalist farmers to produce significant increases in food crops to feed the urban market, and the domination of production by the smallholder sector.
- It also arose as a result of major shifts in international agricultural development policies and the promotion of contract farming and agribusiness linkages by the World Bank.
- However, these changes came too late to save the SMC and the government was toppled by a coup d'état of disaffected junior military ranks led by Rawlings, as the country suffered from a financial crisis associated with the bankruptcy of large scale rice farmers and their default on large loans from the state banking sector (Shepherd).

Rise of contracting

- By the mid 1970s there was a shift in mainstream development approaches from an approach based on trickle down to one of integrating a mass of smallholders into development initiatives.
- World Bank *Assault on World Poverty*:
“Rural development is concerned with the modernization and monetization of rural society and its transition from traditional isolation to integration within the national economy”.

Rural poverty was no longer to be addressed by promoting a progressive elite who would demonstrate the superiority of new technologies which then would be adapted by their poorer neighbours. Rural development was now to be tackled by a full assault on poverty and the poor, through coercive measures to integrate them into commodity markets and shift their ways of producing.

This reflected the emergence of models of contract farming which were becoming incorporated into agribusiness.

Rise of agribusiness

- The major turn in agriculture was the rise of agribusiness, the emergence of the commercialisation of input supply and processing and the shift of value from farm production to these two other sectors. Around ten percent of the value in agriculture was now produced on farm and the major part in input supplies and processing. Farmers increasingly became integrated into agribusiness through contractual farming. By the 1970s the World Bank began to support contract farming in Africa. In Ghana the most significant development occurred in the oil palm sector, with the government establishing a research and development infrastructure and a parastatal company, Ghana Oil Palm Development Corporation (GOPDC).

Alternative approaches

- Critique of commoditisation (Long, Van Der Ploeg, Bernstein, Röling)
- Emphasis on participation (Chambers) but easily co-opted into technology transfer programmes to capture the peasantry
- Pluralism - farmers are heterogeneous and appropriate extension messages need to be developed for different categories of farmers
- However these approaches failed to develop a political economy framework which placed the critique within the context of emerging agribusiness interests rather than on notions of top-down technology transfer modes.
- Emphasis in much of literature on respect for culture and spiritual values (*cosmovisions*).

Neoliberalism

- Early 1980s African states were pressurised into accepting austerity measures under structural adjustment.
- These significantly impacted on agricultural services. Government subsidies on inputs were removed, government agricultural services were divested, and agricultural services involvement in distributing inputs halted.
- Increasingly donor funding for agriculture was allocated to NGOs for stop gapping.
- This resulted in a further proliferation of extension services,(NGO coalitions such as ACDEP had their own agricultural stations and extension services).
- By the late 1980s basic extension services were decentralised in which district agricultural departments carried out their plans in the context of the priorities of District Assemblies rather than the national agricultural services. However extension measures continued to be pretty much uniform in particular sectors. Decentralised agricultural planning experienced difficulty.

T & V system

- During the late 1980s and 1990s extension policy in Ghana largely focused on the introduction of the T&V system, which was heavily promoted by the World Bank.
- The reforms introduced in this period in the Medium Term Agricultural Development Program sought to redefine the extension mandate:
 - 1) away from procurement and distribution and focus extension on the delivery of technical messages.
 - 2) Improve the linkages between extension and research to facilitate better understanding of farmers problems by researchers on feedback on the performance of existing technologies.
 - 3) rationalise the extension service through better integration by unifying crop, livestock and aquaculture, and by building better linkages between extension and input delivery services.
 - 4) extend the reach of extension by limiting the number of visits and extension officer made to one farmer, to ensure they met with greater numbers of farmers, by working with contact farmer groups, and by providing extension agents with motorbikes to ensure their capacity to reach grater numbers of farmers.

The T&V system was somewhat contradictory, in that to win support for its incorporation into agricultural policy institutes it sought to build support by distributing incentives to farmers and extension agents including inputs and motorcycles.

Contradictions in extension reform

- While extension was reformed to focus on communication and information it was largely construed within a transfer of technology approach, which encouraged farmers to experiment with adopting new technologies that were unproven (for them). based on an heavy emphasis of transfer of technology, which required farmers experimenting with new and unknown technologies.
- With reluctance of farmers to pay for inputs, subsidised input programmes were re-introduces and shifted to NGOs such as Sasakawa Global 2000. Global 2000 worked within the extension services using extension agents to distribute subsidised inputs.
- When the subsidies were removed the repayment programmes collapsed.

1990s and 2000s

- A plethora of extension and participatory approaches (farmer field schools)
- Contractual relations between NGOs donors and private sector of which Care International dominant
- Dominance of privatisation in new horticultural and export sectors
- Rise of value chain theory and coalitions of NGOs and private sector
- Rise of input suppliers organising farmers associations (e.g. Yara)

Government Agricultural Policy

- Critique of structural adjustment resulted in new socially inclusionary policies reflected in Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy, and the incorporation of the objectives of the GPRS into policy.
- This exists alongside a commitment to agribusiness and to modernising agriculture:
- “The vision of the extension policy is to have established in the medium term an efficient and demand-driven extension service in a decentralised system, through partnership between the government and the private sector”. FASDEP II
- Standards control
- Increasing productivity in the value chain

Pluralism in agricultural extension

- Pluralism in extension service delivery will continue to be promoted to increase access of different farmer groups.
- Recognition of the different categories of farmers - smallholders are not a homogenous group. (5 different categories of smallholders identified in FASDEP II)

“The pursuit of a modernised agriculture in FASDEP II will target different categories of farmers according to their needs. Thus, risk-prone, largely subsistence farmers, will be targeted with interventions to reduce their vulnerability and help them improve their farming practice”.

Types of farmers identified in FASDEP II

- Large Scale Commercial (LSC);
- Small Commercial (SC);
- Semi-Commercial (S-C);
- Non-Poor Complex Diverse Risk Prone (NPCDR);
- Poor Complex Diverse Risk Prone Farmers (PCDR)
- Women

Reality and Rhetoric

- Major shift in extension policy from targeting elite farmers (justified by “trickle down” theory) to developing mass extension to capture the peasantry.
- However, in reality commodity and agribusiness programmes are able to siphon off the farmers they choose while leaving the rest as a problem for basic extension.
- The concept of plural extension messages and heterogeneous farmers not met by the practice of extension which continues to focus on promoting standard technology packages and using techniques to get farmers to consume these packages rather than introducing elements of choice.
- Little understanding of farmers’ strategies and dilemmas.
- Dismissive of farmers’ innovations and strategies which it seeks to displace. Yet farmers have often developed their own solutions, which may be innovatory, appropriate or problematic. However these are not investigated by research and extension.

Block farming and agribusiness

- All these problems are mirrored in the block farming programme, which operates as agribusiness.
- The block farming programme uses access to land, labour, inputs and credit to capture small farmers.
- Participating farmers are forced to consume all elements of a standardised packages that ensures that fertiliser distributors gain new markets and seed growers sell seed. Farmers pay back loans in kind assuring that government food agencies gains access to cheap food.
- This coercive integration is assumed to be poverty alleviation and social inclusion since it forces changes sanctioned on farmers by donors and government that are equated with development.