

Agricultural Services and Decentralisation in Kenya

Kenya will vote on a new constitution in August 2010. The document proposes greater decentralisation of government with elected governors heading 47 counties that will replace the current system of provinces and districts. This realignment of the institutional landscape presents a number of opportunities and challenges for agricultural service provision in the country. This brief draws on case studies in four districts of Kenya – Mwingi, Rachuonyo, Eldoret West and Nyeri South – that were conducted in 2007 and 2009 to explore the roles and performance of the Ministry of Agriculture and other rural development ministries in the country¹ to provide context to discussions that need to be held in Kenya about the delivery of agricultural extension and other services in Kenya under the new constitutional order. The new constitution has the national ministry making policy, but crop and animal husbandry, fisheries, disease control and other services being undertaken at the county level.

The Roles of the Ministry of Agriculture at the District Level

Kenya is a very diverse country in agro-ecological terms and the four case studies were chosen to reflect this. Nyeri South is located close to Nairobi and receives good rainfall. Tea, coffee

and dairy are all well developed within the district, which has high population density and small farm sizes and a poverty rate well below the national average. The district has well developed input supply systems, and financial services are provided through SACCOs and commercial banks such that even smallholder farmers can access credit. Eldoret West is part of the high potential maize zone of the North Rift, which supplies cereals surpluses to much of the remainder of the country, and enjoys average farm sizes well above those of the other case study districts. By contrast, Rachuonyo is a district of moderate agro-ecological potential and generally small farms, poor road links to its nearest major market, Kisumu, no banks or sources of credit, and few input suppliers. Mwingi is a semi-arid area that regularly receives food aid. Given these differences, one would expect the priorities of the ministries of Agriculture and rural development to differ across districts, not just in terms of commodity focus (different crops, livestock, fisheries), but also in terms of activities undertaken, as the general levels of market development vary from district to district.

Stakeholders in the different districts had similar perceptions of the activities undertaken by the Ministry of Agriculture – heavily

extension focussed, but extension effort less than they would wish for, and following an agenda set at national level. Needs however differed by area with farmers in Nyeri South feeling that basic extension services do not need to be provided by government and that it should focus on cross-cutting issues such as soil fertility and the regulation of input quality that are not picked up within individual commodity chains. They recognised that the root causes of the decline of coffee - poor performance and accountability of coffee cooperatives - could not be sorted out by the local MoA office. In Rachuonyo, in contrast, farmers felt that market chain development would not happen unless MoA performs a coordinating role to bring different stakeholders - public, private, and NGO - together.

Farmer and Stakeholder Perceptions

In focus group discussions farmers and other stakeholders charted the ups and downs of agricultural sector performance within their district over past 4-5 decades and described the MoA contribution to this. Contributions focused on increased or decreased extension effort, but also at times included facilitating access to inputs like new seed varieties and subsidised fertiliser. The discussions indicated that national policy fluctuations, e.g. changes in resources to support extension effort, national efforts to support certain commodities or regions, are felt at local level. For example, the first decade under President Moi was good for Eldoret West, but was the start of decline for others (e.g Nyeri). All areas saw the 1990s as the low point for agricultural performance. It was marked by declining extension staff numbers, demoralised staff and the collapse of farmer support institutions such as Kenya Cooperative Creameries (KCC) and the Kenya Farmers Association (KFA) that had benefited producers all over the country. Their collapse was due to poor management

ultimately traceable to politicisation. The post 2002 era under President Kibaki was a mixed story - revitalisation of KCC, some additional extension effort, but still inadequate to needs, challenges in tea and, surprisingly from a political perspective, failure to revive coffee.

Overall stakeholder and farmer observation is that extension management reforms (e.g. Training and Visit, concentration of effort on selected focal areas, demand-driven extension) have not fundamentally changed the effectiveness with which MoA operates i.e. the efficiency with which available funds are used. Indeed there was some farmer scepticism about all of these mentioned reforms! They have seen and heard it all before, but nothing really changes.

The Past Decade: Budgets Up but Still Significant Inefficiencies

Between 2003 and 2009 the budget of the Ministry of Agriculture has been on an upward trend. This has been driven by the new governments' desire to demonstrate improved service delivery to the electorate, and effective lobbying by well-connected officials within government including politically ambitious Ministers for Agriculture from a key agricultural zone. The government commitment to the Maputo Declaration to spend 10 percent of its budget on agriculture was used as a bargaining chip, although the target has yet to be reached.

Unfortunately, part of the gains from increased funding have been immediately offset by inefficiency losses due to proliferation of ministries within the agricultural sector. These rose from 3 in 2003 to 10 in 2009 - the result of the exigencies of coalition building within a patronage based political system. The district studies show that coordination between staff of the new ministries at district level works tolerably well. They have worked together before, still have offices close together, and share resources and vehicles. The main sector ministries - Agriculture, Livestock Development,

Fisheries and Cooperative Development - also receive some common funding through the National Agriculture and Livestock Extension Project and there are nascent efforts at coordinated program development, activities and funding through the Agricultural Sector Coordination Unit - ASCU. However, the various ministries are very unequally funded and relative funding within a district never fully reflects local circumstances. Thus Rachuonyo, a relatively dry district by the lake, has few resources for fisheries, one veterinarian and a few assistants on bicycles; Mwingi, a semi-arid district, has a bigger budget for crop agriculture than for livestock; Nyeri South has an abundance of veterinary staff despite the low incidence of livestock diseases. All the districts now have a large financial allocation for aquaculture under 2008-09 Economic Stimulus Package, but many have no Fisheries officer. Eldoret West also has inadequate veterinary support, and a single irrigation officer despite high demand for both services.

Amongst the agricultural and rural development ministries, MoA is the best resourced and funded, but even its performance is hindered by inefficiencies in internal resource allocation at district level: 1) there is an insufficient operational budget for the number of staff employed; 2) there are too many staff in offices relative to field-based. Rachuonyo, for example, had 31 professional "office-based" (i.e. divisional and district) staff "supporting" just seven front line extension workers (FEWs) in 2007. Staff reported that recently recruited graduates are not particularly keen on undertaking front line work.

The imbalance in office- relative to field-based staff is the result of: i) a long-term freeze on recruitment, ii) efforts to enhance the qualifications of existing staff, iii) a policy that staff with a diploma are entitled to a post in a divisional office, whilst those with a degree are entitled to a post in a district office. However, due to inadequate transport, staff are promoted

out of regular touch with the farmers whom they are supposed to serve. Those who remain as FEWs are demoralised. Some have remained in the same pay grade for many up to 10-15 years because there is no opportunity to upgrade their education from the certificate level. (Some divisional staff are similarly "stuck" with their diplomas). There is also a sense that hard work makes no difference to reward or remuneration, so why bother? The basic problem is the central control over hiring and promotions as per Civil Service rules. Local managers have little influence over staff deployment, motivation and promotions, so actual performance and diligence count for little. An additional irritant (raised by FEWs in both Rachuonyo and Nyeri South) was the scrapping of the Ksh 300 per month bicycle allowances for FEWs.

The Potential of Decentralisation

There was strong awareness amongst stakeholders (farmer representatives, stockists, and even ministry officials themselves) of the constraints affecting MoA performance. There was a strong desire – by farmers, stakeholders and staff- for greater local control over budgeting and planning, so as to match local service provision more closely to local needs. In particular, participants recommended that the budget for all agriculture-related ministries should be put into "one pot" at district level – even if (for political reasons) the proliferation of ministries remains in Nairobi. Then, local stakeholders could decide on spending and staffing priorities across agriculture, livestock, fisheries, irrigation etc.

Local control would almost certainly lead to greater emphasis on front-line service provision: either more staff in field-based positions and fewer in office posts or fewer overall, but with greater provision for transport and other facilitating factors e.g. mobile phone airtime, money for demonstrations etc. Stakeholders also hoped that some budget could remain to be allocated

through flexible processes to other uses in the manner the Constituency Development Fund (CDF) is supposed to be used.

Would decentralisation lead to better planning and greater accountability of service providers? Should extension and other publicly delivered agricultural services be under the control of locally elected officials, taking views of local stakeholders into account, rather than the top down system Kenya has operated under for the last 60 years? These are some of the possibilities opened up under the new constitution.

The move toward better service delivery through some devolved consultation structures has been happening for some time. District based stakeholder forums have been engaged in consultation and collaboration for a number of years, but have no power to influence budgets or to hold service providers to account for their performance. Often they do not even know what the budget is. The four case study districts have stakeholder forums at various stages of development, with Eldoret West having among the best developed. What role can such an institution play in improving participatory planning and accountability under a decentralised administrative system?

International experience suggests that decentralisation is no panacea. Local decision makers can be captured by local elites (e.g. larger farmers) as easily as national elites are. Within Kenya the operations of the CDFs show the potential for elite capture and misappropriation of devolved funds. Services only become more responsive where citizens are organised, eloquent, vigilant or well-connected – and this can count against the poor. Nevertheless, there are undoubtedly efficiency improvements that could be realised through a more decentralised approach to the delivery of agricultural services in an agro-ecologically, infrastructurally and culturally heterogeneous country as Kenya. Within such a system the current stakeholder forums (with appropriate new powers) could play a valuable role in both planning and holding service providers to account. The details of how agricultural services will be delivered needs to be addressed as part of the roll out of the new constitution. So far nobody is talking about it.

Endnotes:

(1) The four case study reports can be downloaded from: www.future-agricultures.org. They are based on fieldwork conducted by young researchers who undertook key informant interviews, farmer focus group discussions, and held a validation/feedback workshop in each district that was attended by the senior researchers.

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