

About us: Why is LBL Interested in Decentralization, Democratization and Vocational Training?

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We have been asked by one of our regular clients, why LBL is increasingly looking into democratization, decentralization, vocational training, etc. He was wondering, whether we are abandoning our core activities like compiling, synthesizing and communicating experiences gained in rural development and extension, and in particular the question of how to finance extension services. Well, we believe our interest in democratization and decentralization and vocational training are a direct outcome of our findings into funding extension services.

Summary

1. We have become increasingly aware of the importance of so-called “public” resources such as forests and rangelands for the future viability of farms and livelihoods. We need to look much more into the details of the interaction between private interests and public interests on these resources. In the future, extensionists will need to understand and cope with these interactions much better.
2. The “public” is a complicated multi-level thing (village to nation). Negotiations between these various levels are required in order to sort out the public interest at each level. That will then help in identifying which public level will need to pay for which services. In the future we need people who know how to facilitate these negotiations.
3. In order to figure out which level needs to take care of which public interests, the political concept of subsidiarity needs to be understood and applied. This leads us to be interested in democratization, understood to be the process by which subsidiarity is operationalized.
4. The suitable interaction of roles between private initiatives, NGOs, Government and Donors (understood to be sources of funds that are not accountable to the beneficiaries) needs to be clearly understood when financing from the outside. “Bad donorance” has unfortunately often inadvertently sabotaged the emergence of ownership and thereby of “good local governance”. Good local governance includes organizing and sustainably funding extension.
5. So finally we need to explore suitable trainings so that there will be people in rural areas who have the broad range of skills and knowledge required to organize and provide useful services in rural areas on a sustainable basis. And those skills will include knowing how to find the money to run them.

1. Common property resources and interactions private ↔ public

In our work we increasingly became aware how intricately the public interest interacts with the private interests of farmers in rural areas. The simple fact, that forests or “common grazing lands” or openly running water resources rarely belong to single families but rather to some public bodies, bears this out. Add to that the fact that the productivity of the privately owned fields and in general the livelihood of most farming families strongly depends on the availability and quality of such common resources. The dependency of individual livelihoods on the common property resources shows how close the public-private interaction is even down at the village level. Unfortunately most production-oriented agricultural extension rarely took this fact into consideration, often resulting in compartmentalization, ie. agricultural extensionists worry about instructing farmers how to grow more crops, foresters make sure the livestock doesn't eat the young

trees..... So, in order to conceptualize extension work that takes this important dynamic between common resources and production of fields and livelihood-strategies into consideration, we started to wonder how an intervention (ie. with extensionists) would help.

2. Public interest is multi-level and needs to be negotiated

We soon realized, that the public interest is a complicated multi-tiered thing. What is public for a village (ie. a community forest) has to be dealt with as private property of the village at the District level, etc. This multi-level nature of the public-private continuum is the real pragmatic reason for decentralization, although usually it is not understood that way. I cite from a recent effort in Tanzania to conceptualize the reasons for decentralization:

- Decentralization recognizes that public interests are located at different levels of the public (Village, District, Province, Nation, etc). Decentralization also recognizes that there needs to be a match at each level between the public responsibilities at that level, and the required fiscal, political, legal and administrative rights of that level. For instance a District needs to have the fiscal, political, legal and

administrative rights required to take responsibility of the public interest at the District level.

Why do we in LBL dig into these things? Because there need to be negotiations between these various levels in order to identify the public interest at various levels, and thereby define who will pay how much for the diverse types of services delivered to farmers and villages. So decentralization is right on track with the question of paying for extension.

3. Subsidiarity as a concept for conceiving and organizing public interests

But how to organize the negotiations? What are the underlying concepts that govern the agreements, and which have to be made amongst the various levels? That is where we are discovering the beauty of the concept of subsidiarity, and we openly state that (again I am citing from the same effort in Tanzania):

- Democratization must mean achieving practical democracy:
 1. Local public institutions take care of the public interest at their level.
 2. 'Bottom-up' mandated institutions take care of the public interest at the higher level.

Table 1: Subsidiarity: Levels of Public Organisation and Interest

Perceived as private ↓	Global	↑ Perceived as public	Seen from a higher level, any good or interest at a lower level is perceived as private. Seen from a lower level, any good or interest at a higher level is perceived as public.
	Country		
	State		
	District (or City, Province)		
	Village (or Neighbourhood)		
	Family (or Clan)		
	Individual		

Individual: My bowl of cooked rice is my individual possession, and therefore my private property.

Family: The kitchen with the cooking pots and the firewood stack just outside our house is the exclusive – and therefore private – property of our family. For myself as an individual, the firewood is a “public” good, as it belongs to all of our family. For our neighbours, our firewood-stack is the private property of our family.

Village: Together with the other villagers we manage the village forest. For all of us villagers, this is a public good. We defend our public forest against the intrusion of goats and wood-cutters from the neighbouring villages. For the neighbouring villages, the District, or the State, our forest is the private good of our village.

How does this relate to “Good local Governance “?

- Good local governance is achieved when public institutions are accountable to their constituents through mechanisms that
 - a) ensure that the local population is informed in a transparent way on what is going on with their public projects (public display of information),
 - b) ensure official checks and balances (audits, public hearings)
 - c) allow diverse and various groups from the civil society to request, contribute, check and challenge the information that is publicly provided.

And again, why is LBL interested in this? Because we see, that in the future there will have to be people in rural areas, who know about these concepts and know how to implement them concretely. They will have to facilitate the negotiations. This is a continuous affair. Who will do that? Well, we don't care whether you want to call them extensionists or not, but it will be people who will know how to help groups of farming families negotiate with the village about using water from a stream, or people who will know how to facilitate the discussion in a village to find out how the poor will not destroy the forest and yet still be full members of the community, or people who will help the discussions between a District and villages in figuring out how to organize the building of roads and telephone lines in order to improve market access of niche-products from the villages, etc. etc. We now consider these skills “higher level extension skills” of what we have come to call “the new extensionist” (see BN 1/2002). Now don't worry, these same people will always be dealing with crops and livestock and forests. After all cropping and forests and rangelands and streams are the reasons for entering into these negotiations.

And back to financing: Unless these negotiations are successfully made, there will be no sustainable funding mechanisms available. So we have to interest ourselves in figuring out the underlying concepts and the procedures, so that consistent practical systems can evolve.

4. The need for good donorance for avoiding the sabotage of emerging good governance

During the PINGOGODON (Private Initiative, NGO, Govt., Donors) thinktanks that we've conducted in the past years we became aware of the intricacies of the roles to be played by each of these actors, and how they should ideally interact. I believe there is still a lot to be learnt there, because we still make too many procedural mistakes (like supporting an NGO to conduct basic healthcare), that lead to sabotage of the emergence of truly viable locally based institutions. Particularly the emergence of possibilities of providing many services on a private basis has really tickled us into thinking hard about how the public could save a lot of money, if only it would learn to enhance private initiative and focus it's efforts on the public interest. I won't go into the details here. But what we are increasingly understanding is, that public intervention – particularly by Donors and local NGOs – is often actually inadvertently sabotaging the emergence of viable private service provision. And even more seriously, outside intervention is often sabotaging the emergence of competent local public bodies. The joke has been coined, that maybe when we talk about good governance, we may also have to think hard about “good donorance”.

And again back to financing: Of course “good local governance” is the result of successful negotiations of the type I have pointed out above. Good governance at the village and District level is a very very practical affair, and it has to do with – among other things – making sure services are available for villages and farmers, and paid for through consistent means. And whenever a service can be provided commercially (because the clients of the services are earning more money due to the services they receive), then this must be built in accordingly. I'm afraid that many poverty-oriented programs are being rather counterproductive in this respect, leading to institutional and operational failures once they retreat. We must learn to become better in this, or else efforts in organizing services in the future will again fail.

5. Trainings for rural skills....

And finally trainings: All the above points always beg the question: But how on earth are we going to find all the people who will be skilled to do this in rural areas? Very very good question. And let us remember: Part of the skills that each competent person would have must include the skill to find the money to do it. Obviously we have to involve ourselves in figuring this out. And obviously we need to look into the skills to do private business with all kinds of diverse services. Because quite frankly, there will be no public funds in the future for running large publicly funded institutions with a lot of employed field-people providing the whole range of rural services. Each service, specifically crafted, needs to be "sold" differently, depending on who benefits and who is interested in the service being provided. There are a lot of skills involved there, and they all need to be trained!

So again: Dealing with vocational trainings and rural business development is right on track with our concern about financing extension.

Well, the above considerations are the result of LBL's continuous exploring over the past 15 years of the emerging challenges. We need to do this on a strategic level. Had we not explored these avenues, we would still be thinking that the best way to achieve rural development would be to instruct farmers how to grow better crops. Unless we continue to explore future challenges and question conventional thinking, we will in 10 years still believe that the best way to combat poverty is to work via charitable aid-organisations. We can't allow ourselves not to challenge conventional thinking and not to explore new perspectives. But don't worry: LBL is and always will be in intimate and close contact with the realities of people in rural areas. It's based on those realities and experiences that we derive the competence to question and explore.