

MINDING THE GAP BETWEEN POLICY AND PRACTICE AMONGST EXTENSION WORKERS: LESSONS FROM KWAZULU NATAL

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ABSTRACT

20 years into a post-apartheid South Africa, the National Development Plan (NDP) provides the contextual and institutional framework for all of governments activities. As a result, there is a call for extension to increasingly become associated with efficient and effective delivery of services in line with government policy to improve the quality of public services which are critical to achieving a transformed racially equitable public service. This article interrogates the issue of a gap between policy and implementation amongst Extension Workers by reflecting on the findings of research conducted as part of a doctoral study in Public Administration by the main author at the University of KwaZulu Natal. The article makes reference to the findings related to policy knowledge amongst Extension Workers and the challenges related to policy implementation in KwaZulu Natal, and seeks to use the findings of this research to present opportunities and challenges for the implementation of the NDP and concludes that whilst Extension Workers are now challenged to find a balance between their functionality within extension and as public servants, it is important for some consideration to be made by government and education institutions for the changing roles of Extension Workers.

Key words: policy gap, governance, food security, poverty, National Development Plan, Extension Workers.

1. INTRODUCTION

The National Development Plan (NDP) aims to eliminate poverty and reduce inequality in South Africa by 2030. Through this plan, the Government hopes to realise these goals by “drawing on the energies of its people, growing an inclusive economy, building capabilities, enhancing the capacity of the state, and promoting leadership and partnerships throughout society” (RSA, 2011: 61). Government aims to “engage with all sectors to understand how they contribute to policy implementation and particularly to identify any obstacles to them fulfilling their role effectively” (RSA, 2011: 61). The Plan sets the main parameters for the budget process for the next 17 years, and seeks to improve the quality of public services which are critical to achieving transformation. It forms part of government’s attempt to achieve good governance which is an integral part of a global movement towards enhanced public administration.

The Integrated Food Security Strategy is one such strategy that aims at contributing to the poverty reduction aims of the NDP, whilst simultaneously addressing the Constitutional Right to food and those protected in the Bill of Rights. Extension Workers as implementers of the Food Security Strategy are challenged to contribute to

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poverty reduction, and as public servants are expected to function within the ambit of policy guidelines. These include:

- Section 195 of the Constitution, which outlines the Basic Values and Principles governing public administration;
- The *Batho Pele* Principles, which provide the roles and responsibilities of all public servants;
- The Bill of Rights, which seek to guide public administrators towards improved performance and ethical conduct; and
- The Norms and Standards for Extension Workers, which provide the guiding standards for principles, ethical conduct and adherence to professional values in the functioning of the Extension Worker.

Within this context, there are many challenges ranging from the need for increased support for improved institutional arrangements which form part of the attempt by government to correct the imbalances of a previously racially segregated public service delivery process. Consequently, the attainment of a “cadre of qualified, experienced and motivated world-class agricultural research and development specialists, managers and policy makers to lead South Africa towards achieving the long term goals of food security (and) poverty alleviation...” is required (RSA, 2008: 9). Within this context, the real challenge is that implementers of policy must not only be qualified, but need to be knowledgeable regarding public policy.

The purpose of this article is to explore whether there is a gap between policy and practice amongst Extension Workers. This article achieves this by presenting some of the findings of a doctoral research study, undertaken to respond to the question, “To what extent are the aims of the food security amongst Extension Workers within KwaZulu Natal being achieved within a good governance agenda?” Whilst the study explored a number of themes related to this question, this article reports on the findings related to the existing policy knowledge amongst the Extension Workers employed by the KwaZulu Natal Department of Agriculture and Environmental Affairs.

These findings are useful firstly, because they provide a reflection of the policy knowledge related to food security which is one of the key strategies for poverty alleviation. Secondly, they are useful as they present a reflection of the basic policy related to public servants, *viz.* Section 195 of the Constitution; the Bill of Rights, the Norms and Standards for Extension Workers and food security policy knowledge, which set the foundation for poverty reduction initiatives within the Department of Agriculture. Thirdly, these results have the potential to reflect on the potential successes and/ or failure in the achievement of the goals of the NDP and present opportunity for learning and change amongst Extension Workers.

2. METHODOLOGY

The empirical study was conducted in the province of KwaZulu Natal which consists of one metropolitan and ten district councils.

The target population for this study was the Extension Workers of the KZN Department of Agriculture and Environmental Affairs (DAEA) and the Managers of

the 11 Districts, as indicated in Figure 1. These districts are divided by the KZN DAEA into three regions for administrative purposes, namely the North Region (Umkhanyakude, Zululand, Uthungulu and Ilembe), Central Region (Uthukela, Amajuba and Umzinyathi) and South Region (eThekweni, Ugu, uMgungundlovu and Sisonke); with the Extension Directory (2013) indicating a total of 603 permanently employed Extension Workers who were the target population.

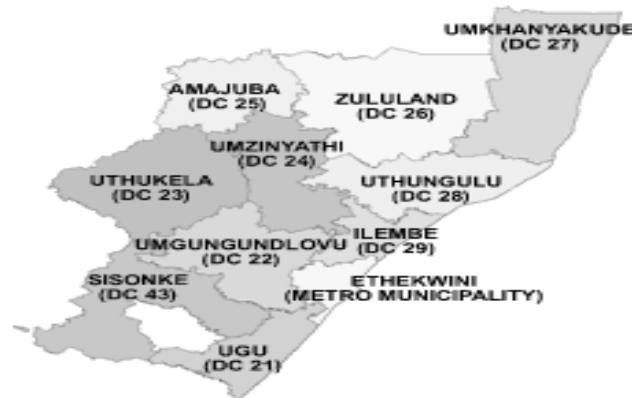


Figure 1: KZN District Municipalities (COGTA 2012)

In determining the sample, the recommendations made by Bless & Higson-Smith (2000: 96), Neuman (2003: 232), Grinnell & Williams (1990: 127) and Burger & Silima (2006: 666) and Stoker (in Burger & Silima 2006: 667) for determining sample size were considered. These included the need to simplify research; save time and costs; and the need to secure access to the sample. These factors were critical in generating the sample for this study as there is a large number of Extension Workers permanently employed by the KZN DAEA, who are spread over 828 Wards (COGTA, 2012: 2). As a result, the sample was 207 Extension Workers in a total of four Districts making up the South Region of the KZN DAEA. This region offered opportunity to include two of the most deprived districts in KZN, namely, Ugu and Sisonke which are, according to the Community Survey 2007 (Statistics South Africa, 2009) two of the five, most deprived districts of KZN.

In addition, this region includes eThekweni, which is the only Metropolitan District in KZN. Thus, this methodological approach provided an opportunity to sample Extension Workers based in a cross section of districts. The South Region constitutes 34% of the total population. In order to accommodate a response rate error, a minimum response rate of at least 60% (124) within this Region was seen as sufficient. In order to ensure methodological pluralism, a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methodologies was employed in order to achieve a more appropriate response for contemporary research. The empirical study was conducted through a survey undertaken amongst the Extension Workers and their District Managers in the South Region of the KZN DAEA through the use of pre coded self-administered questionnaires and interviews respectively. Inferential and descriptive statistics were used as part of the statistical analysis.

3. FINDINGS FROM THE SELF-ADMINISTERED QUESTIONNAIRE

A total of 141 questionnaires were returned which gave a 69% response rate. Of these, 11 were largely incomplete and did not form part of the findings. A total of 74.6% of

respondents possess tertiary qualifications, and 30% post graduate qualifications. The ratio of males to females is 4:6, and 73.1% of respondents were employed within the KZN DAEA for longer than 10 years.

i) Working Knowledge of Policy

A large proportion of the respondents (83.8%) indicated that they have a working knowledge of the Food Security Strategy. Approximately two-thirds (66.2%) of the respondents knew about training programmes offered in relation to Food Security, whilst nearly a fifth (21.5%) were not aware. Of those who indicated that they had been aware of the training programmes, 70.1% attended whilst the remainder did not (as indicated in the Figure 2 below).

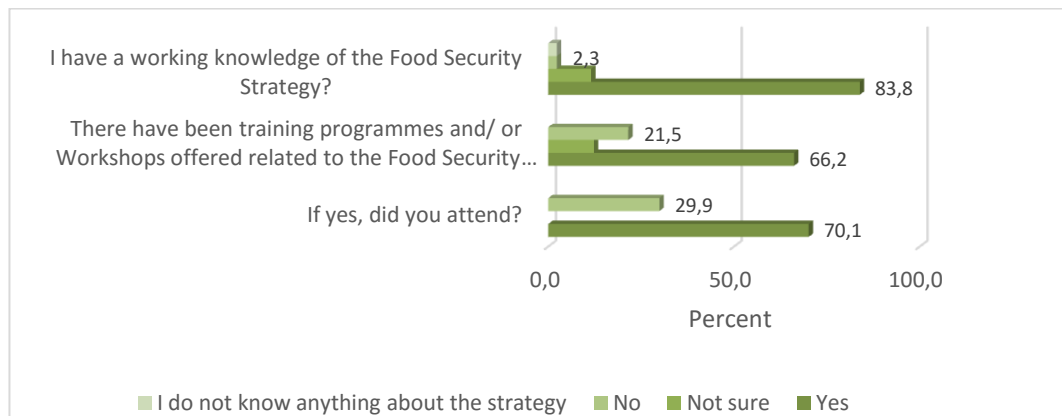


Figure 2: Working Knowledge of policy

ii) Targets for Food Security

The majority of respondents (73.1%) indicated that they are familiar with the targets for Food Security and poverty reduction (see Table 1 below). About 26.9% were not familiar with the targets or are uncertain. For poverty alleviation targets as identified within the NDP are to be met, implementers of policy, including Extension Workers, need to have accurate knowledge on the key aspects of the policy frameworks within which they operate if they are to make a significant contribution to development. This is reiterated by Zwane (2012: 19).

Table 1: I am familiar with the targets for food security and poverty reduction?

| | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | Yes | 95 | 73.1 | 73.1 |
| | Not sure | 22 | 16.9 | 90.0 |
| | No | 13 | 10.0 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 130 | 100.0 | 100.0 |

iii) Policy Knowledge 1: Constitution and *Batho Pele*

Figure 3 below indicates a decreasing level of agreement and increasing level of uncertainty pattern. Whilst the majority of respondents (96.2%) feel that *Batho Pele* is part of their daily functioning as an Extension Worker, fewer (67.7%) are aware of the targets for poverty reduction that they use as a guideline, and even fewer (48.5%) see a connection between the Bill of Rights and the way in which service delivery needs to be conducted. Half the respondents saw no connection or were uncertain.

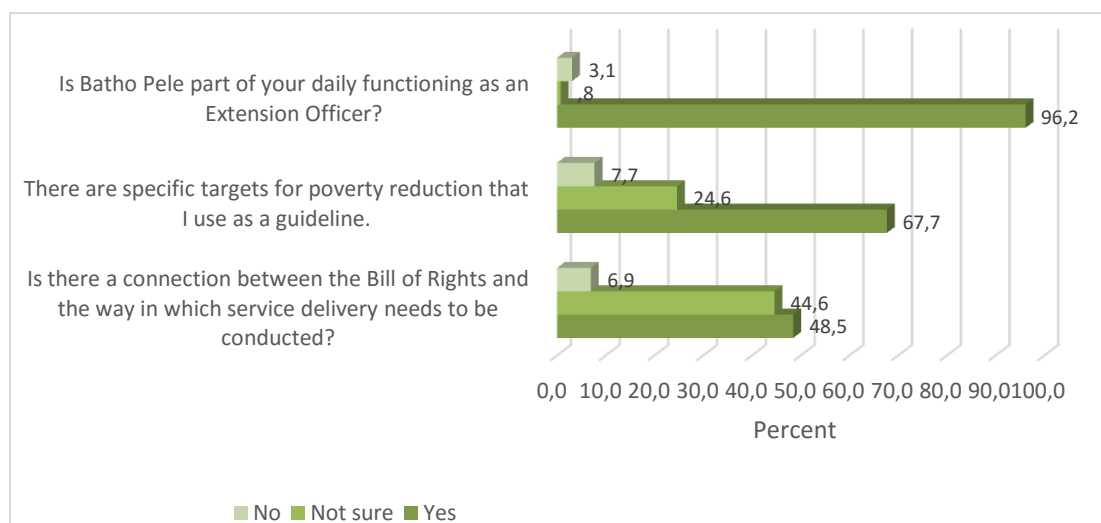


Figure 3: Policy Knowledge 1

This is alarming as the Bill of Rights sets the foundation for poverty reduction intervention by guaranteeing a person’s right to food and identifies that the government has a responsibility in ensuring this right. The challenge here is that the education and training of Extension Workers need to highlight these links, as it would help to position the responsibilities attached to being in the employment of government and the role as a public servant responsible for the delivery of government mandates. This is reiterated by Kroukamp (2007: 4) and Mohamed Sayeed (2014: 229).

iv) Policy Knowledge 2: Norms and Standards

When asked to rate their knowledge and understanding of Section 195 of the Constitution, a 50% rating of uncertainty was achieved, as indicated in Figure 4.

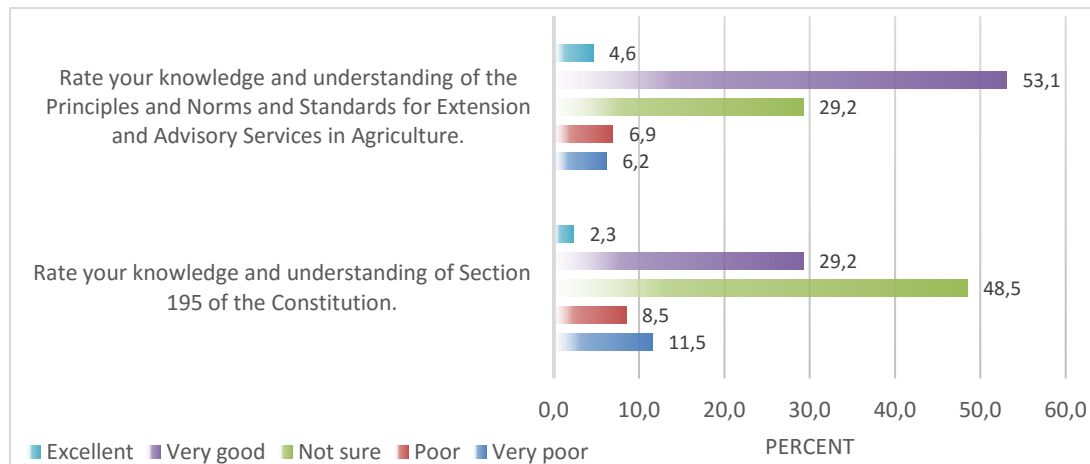


Figure 4: Policy knowledge 2

When asked to rate their knowledge and understanding of the Norms and Standards for Extension and Advisory Services, 53.1% rated themselves as Very Good. Only 4.6% rated themselves as Excellent. Overall, 13.1% rated themselves as Poor, whilst an alarming 29.2% rated themselves as Unsure. With 42.3% providing a negative response, there is clearly a need for the Department to consider training in this regard if the professionalization of Extension Workers is to translate into a reality.

The majority of the respondents (48.5%) indicated that they were uncertain about their knowledge and understanding of Section 195 of the Constitution, with an additional 20% rating themselves as having a Poor/ Very poor understanding of the section. This alarmingly high (a combined 68.5%) negative response, clearly indicates that Extension Workers are largely unaware of the guidelines for all those who form part of the public service. As a result, they will have limited ability to contribute to the overall functionality of government.

Whilst one of the managers did point out that knowledge hereof comes out of studying public administration in more detail, it nevertheless forms a critical part of the boundaries public servants need to operate within and must be addressed as an area of concern. Kroukamp (2007: 4) argues that training “will assist government to develop the professional capacities of public servants and promote institutional change, thereby contributing towards equipping them with the necessary knowledge, skills and competencies to carry out their jobs effectively. These skills and competencies will not only be occupational, technical or professional in nature, but should also relate to problem solving, innovation, decision-making and leadership issues in order to address the changes brought about by transformation.”

The study produced a number of significant p values, some of which must be noted for this discussion. There is a relationship between the District of the respondent and their perceptions about strategy, their policy knowledge and the extent to which they value professional ethics as a key part of their functioning as Extension Workers. Overall,

there are direct relationships between respondents who feel that they have adequate knowledge of the legislative frameworks, and their choices regarding reporting, making recommendations, and their perceptions of their impact as Extension Workers. Respondents who feel that they are free to report on both positive and negative outcomes of intervention were more likely to have a higher rating for their policy knowledge. With a p value of 0.429 there is a direct relationship between respondents who use specific targets in their functioning and their rating of their knowledge of the Norms and Standards (Mohamed Sayeed 2014: 250).

With a negative p value of -0.173 (Mohamed Sayeed 2014: 250- 251), the results indicate that the more *Batho Pele* becomes part of their daily functioning, there is a decreasing rating for the respondents' knowledge and understanding of the Principles and Norms and Standards for Extension and Advisory Services in Agriculture. It is an unusual result, as *Batho Pele* aims at improving service delivery, and as a result requires public servants to be more aware of the mandates within which they operate. The results, further suggest that Extension Workers do not understand these critical connections between the legislative frameworks and the guiding principles for Extension Workers.

4. FINDINGS FROM THE INTERVIEWS

All managers indicated that whilst Food Security is the ultimate goal, it forms part of their overall activities to engage in agriculture related activities within their Districts. The concern identified by this study is that it appears that the provincial and national targets are the focus of Food Security, rather than the real needs of communities. Managers acknowledged that Extension Workers have very limited knowledge on the legislative frameworks such as Section 195, the Bill of Rights and the Norms and Standards for Extension and Advisory Services largely because they do not use the information in the policies often enough. It is important to note here that the literature study highlighted that the Extension Recovery Programme, introduced in 2008 which was aimed at up skilling through a focus on training around the scientific aspects of agriculture, does not provide any training around policy implementation. Despite this situation, it must be noted that the interviews revealed that they are trying to comply with some of the legislative frameworks through an improved focus on forward planning and attempts to ensure compliance with the guidelines for effective service delivery by way of focussing on the key indicators of the Annual Performance Plan.

The interviews further revealed that Extension Workers are orientated towards their responsibilities outlined in the Annual Performance Plan, and that whilst much can be learned on the job, it is not sufficient. Additionally, Managers indicated that the poor training of some Extension Workers in regards to understanding their roles and responsibilities as a public servant, impacts adversely on policy implementation, and must be addressed by higher education institutions. These challenges, combined with the preoccupation with targets set out in the performance plan, as opposed to the needs of the communities, provides a further challenge in Extension Workers ability to respond to the needs of communities.

5. CHALLENGES AND A WAY FORWARD

The study revealed that there is no structured attempt to train Extension Workers in policy, nor is there an induction programme to familiarise extension workers with their roles and responsibilities as implementers of government policy (Mohamed Sayeed 2014: 195). In light hereof, the main challenges, amongst others, for Extension Workers towards improved policy implementation include:

- professional affiliation of all Extension Workers in order to improve ethical value and commitment to the tradition of extension; and
- gaining a balance between their core functions (extension and advisory services), with the requirements and mandates of the Department.

The KZN DAEA has made several commitments to remedy the situation.

- Extension Workers are being encouraged to have their own local programmes, where they take ownership at the local level;
- an Extension and Advisory component overlooks the activities of Extension Workers and provides support; and
- Extension Workers have been elevated to that of professional thus providing conditions for them to be motivated to perform effectively and efficiently with efforts being made to incentivise people for work well done through the annual awards.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Policies are abundant in South Africa. Currently the activities within the Department of Agriculture are guided largely by a strategy document for Food Security through the Integrated Food Security Strategy. This results in a situation where in the absence of formal policy on food security, the mandates given by national government in the Department of Agriculture, have sought to mobilize Extension Workers towards addressing the issue of food insecurity at the local level. A large number of Extension Workers however, do not have sufficient working knowledge on these directives, nor do they see the critical linkages between Constitutional Rights and Guidelines with the work that they do. This policy gap, contributes to poor implementation of policy, and an impaired ability to effectively contribute to poverty reduction strategies.

The overall success of the NDP within the Department of Agriculture lies in the ability of Extension Workers as implementers of policy to possess policy knowledge. The evidence suggests that whilst Extension Workers do not lack technical training, they need to change the way that they think about their role in development. Whilst creativity and passion have potential to improve functionality, it is becoming increasingly important for Higher Education Institutions to reassess the content and methodologies adopted in their teaching as indicated by Mohamed Sayeed (2014: 200). This combination of creativity and passion, with changes in training, both on the part of Higher Education Institutions and the Department, can assist in keeping Extension Workers abreast of the needs created by a transforming public service whilst balancing their core functions in extension. All measures adopted need to be seen as part of a road map to achieving success for the implementation of the NDP, and can only be made possible through a commitment of resources, attitudes and motivations of all participants.

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