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Capacities of Extension Personnel within the Pluralistic System of Post-Conflict Liberia

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Abstract

Agricultural extension can play a major role in stimulating development, reducing hunger and poverty, and promoting stability in post-conflict Liberia. Consequently, the nation has prioritized extension to increase agricultural productivity and enhance livelihoods. However, the capacities of Ministry of Agriculture personnel and NGO workers have considerable impacts on the quality of extension services. This study sought to (a) describe the human resource capacity of Ministry of Agriculture personnel and NGO workers to deliver extension services to small-scale farmers, and (b) identify organizational barriers impacting the capacity of extension personnel. A qualitative design and purposive sampling were used, and the study included perspectives from 13 MoA and 16 NGO extensionists along with 39 farmers.

Results showed MoA officers possessed lower technical and andragogical capacities than their NGO peers. Capacity deficiencies were especially acute among older MoA personnel employed prior to the conflict. Both the MoA and NGO sector advocated professional development, yet only larger international NGOs (INGOs) could provide these opportunities to their personnel. Inclusion of MoA and domestic NGO officers in INGO trainings helped develop basic capacities, although these opportunities were not maximized. Operational barriers such as high farmer-to-officer ratios, inadequate funding for extension programming, and challenges in modernizing the workforce further compromised officer capacity. Recommendations included prioritizing efforts to maximize the benefits of INGO trainings to the public sector, attracting skilled extensionists from the NGO sector to the MoA, incorporating and promoting younger officers and female extensionists to meet modern demands, and using low-cost methods to improve coverage.

Keywords: Human Resource Capacities, Organizational Barriers, Post-Conflict, Liberia

Introduction

Agricultural extension is recognized as crucial to agricultural development (Swanson, Bentz, & Sofranko, 1997), a catalyst for economic growth (Cervantes-Godoy & Dewbre, 2010), and a driver for rural livelihood development and poverty reduction (Food and Agricultural Organization [FAO], 2013). As such, establishing effective and stable extension services are goals of many agricultural development strategies (Swanson & Rajalahti, 2010). Agricultural extension is particularly valuable to countries emerging from conflict, with immediate needs to re-establish food supplies to address acute food insecurity, provide livelihoods to rural populations in extreme poverty, and promote stability and social cohesion (Collier, 2006).

However, public systems in developing countries face significant challenges. Institutional capacity is often low, funding is inadequate to properly conduct activities and pay officers, and personnel are poorly trained and lack current technical information (Feder, Willett, & Zijp, 1999). These circumstances are worsened for nations emerging from conflict and rebuilding institutions and extension systems. As a result, the quality, relevance, and sustainability of extension services suffer and agricultural development stagnates (World Bank, 2012).

Effective extension services are crucial for the government of the Republic of Liberia. Liberia is a post-conflict country recovering from 25 years of conflict that left the nation and its people devastated. Immediately following the cessation of conflict in 2003, the Human Development Report ranked Liberia 164 of 168 countries globally (United Nations Development Program, 2005). Hunger, poverty, and other social indicators reached critical levels while Liberia's economy, albeit fairly underdeveloped before the conflicts, was

virtually destroyed (Humphreys & Richards, 2005).

With other sectors decimated, agriculture's role increased significantly in the post-conflict period. Immediately following the conflict, agriculture accounted for 76.9% of Liberia's GDP, the highest rate in Africa, and employed 70% of the labor force. These numbers have remained high, at 38.8% and 48.9% respectively, by 2013 estimates (World Bank, n.d.). Food crop production is still identified as "the most important source of livelihood" (MoA, 2007, p. 13) in the country. About 74% of Liberians list food crop production as their primary income source, and rates are higher in rural counties. Still, food insecurity affects 80% of rural populations, with smallholder households the most vulnerably food insecure (MoA, 2007).

Given the role and importance of agriculture, the sector is anticipated to heavily contribute to overall development, peacebuilding, and poverty reduction in Liberia. The Liberian government has placed agriculture "at the center of reconstruction and development efforts" (MoA, 2007, p. 1). Agricultural extension is central to these efforts, yet the capacity of extension providers in post-conflict Liberia is viewed as a limitation to successful development (McNamara, Swanson, & Simpson, 2011). The human resource capacity of extensionists in post-conflict settings commonly declines as professional development is suspended, access to current technical information is interrupted, and the inability to operate during the conflict period leads to skill deterioration (Collier & Duponchel, 2013). However, these factors affect different countries and extension systems in different ways. A better understanding of the current human resource capacity of extension personnel and organizational barriers affecting that capacity is therefore needed in order to

successfully increase agricultural productivity, improve food security, and enhance livelihoods for Liberians.

Conceptual Framework and Review of Literature

Conceptual frameworks in the development field are often addressed as models that show linkages and causalities (Birner, Cohen, & Ilukor, 2011). Figure 1 demonstrates the relationship between agricultural extension, development, and productivity, and how these areas represent causal linkages to poverty and hunger that ultimately contribute to stability or the emergence of conflict. To illustrate these dynamics, effective agricultural extension promotes successful agricultural development and productivity, which in turn stimulates improvements in poverty and hunger indicators that can help promote stability, while failure in agriculture can exacerbate these same areas and create the conditions for conflict.

The relationship between extension and productivity/development is evidenced by extension's central role in promoting agricultural growth (Cervantes-Godoy & Dewbre, 2010). In contrast, poor agricultural extension contributes to low development and productivity, as seen in Africa where extension systems are often weakest (Feder et al., 1999) and per capita food production has actually declined in the past half century (FAO, n.d.; Wiggins & Leturque, 2010).

The conceptual model also shows causal linkages between agriculture and poverty and hunger indicators, which are interconnected (FAO, 2013). Regional

agricultural productivity trends that closely mirror changes in both poverty and hunger provide evidence of this relationship. For example, while productivity gains in several regions led to improvements in poverty and hunger, minimal productivity increases in Sub-Saharan Africa corresponded to minor reductions in poverty (-17.3%) and in hunger (-28.5%) since 1990 (FAO, n.d.; World Bank, 2015).

Finally, agriculture, poverty, and hunger all contribute to nations' paths towards stability or conflict. Many armed conflicts occur where dependence on agriculture is highest, and sizeable decreases in the sector often prompt violence (Zaur, 2006). Also, countries with lower poverty and hunger indices show greater stability and those with higher poverty and food insecurity are historically more likely to experience conflict (Wiggins & Leturque, 2010).

Conflict itself creates a vicious cycle. Countries in conflict suffer further setbacks in agricultural extension and development as institutions collapse, extension workforces are unable to work, and services to farmers disappear. Agricultural productivity declines as farmers are displaced and crops are destroyed or looted, and poverty and hunger indicators worsen due to internal displacement and interruptions in the food supply (Wiggins & Leturque, 2010). When conflict is halted, the need for immediate progress in agricultural development heightens the importance of rebuilding weakened agricultural extension services to avoid further violence and escape the same cycle.

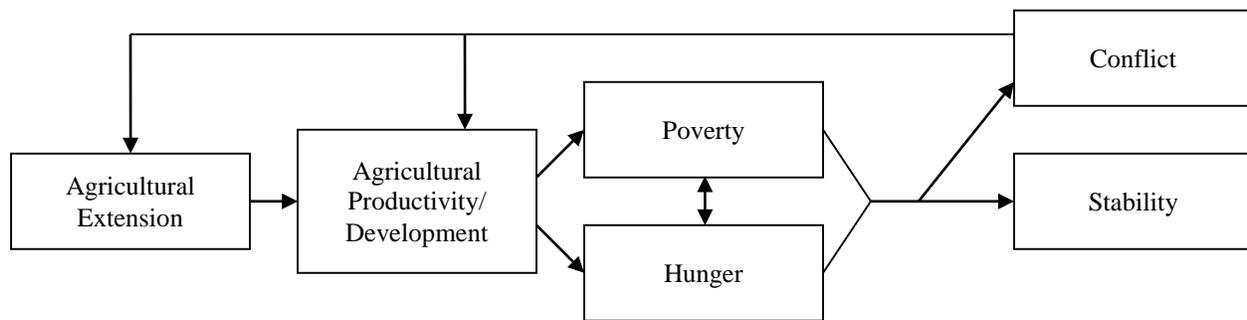


Figure 1. Relationships between agricultural development, poverty and hunger, and conflict.

Many post-conflict countries face significant challenges in restarting national economies, during which time agriculture becomes the de facto occupation for many people while other sectors recover (Collier, 2006). As a complementary factor, extension is essential to overall development and economic growth (Obwona & Guloba, 2009), along with food security and poverty reduction (Cunguara & Moder, 2011; Moore, Dormody, VanLeeuwen, & Harder, 2013), especially in the early post-conflict period. Extension also benefits peacebuilding and stability by representing governmental commitment to public services and building trust in new governments and institutions (Collier, 2006), while strengthening the agricultural sector's ability to reabsorb displaced rural peoples (Tizikara & Lugor, n.d.) and reintegrate former fighters (Blattman & Annan, 2012; Humphreys & Richards, 2005).

Despite its positive potential, post-conflict extension is compromised by poor institutional and human resource capacity. Conflict drastically alters or completely destroys institutions, which results in a breakdown of services during conflict and significant challenges restarting services in the post-conflict period. Post-conflict institutions are exceptionally weak, often operate in a context of reduced funding, and

suffer from a lack of human and physical resources (Aron, 2003; Geda, 2011).

The need to rebuild extension workforces following conflict is complicated by shortages of qualified individuals. Agricultural colleges are the main producer of potential extensionists, yet these institutions' abilities to function and/or provide quality instruction are also compromised by conflict. In post-conflict Mozambique, Davis, Ekboir, and Spielman (2008) found graduates of agricultural colleges were not prepared to serve stakeholders or help facilitate agricultural development. Graduates were only competent in traditional and non-participatory teaching methods that used the technology transfer model of extension. Without a trained supply of extensionists to fill vacancies, overall service provision is compromised.

Extension personnel who remain through conflict and resume activities post-conflict often suffer a process of skill deterioration that places them at a disadvantage when services are restarted. Collier and Duponchel (2013) termed this phenomenon "forgetting by not doing" (p. 67), whereby public servants (including extensionists) lose capacity during conflict due to lack of application opportunities through disruption of extension

responsibilities and displacement from work. Similarly, officers' knowledge base is frequently out-of-date due to time spent without in-training. In post-conflict Iraq, extension officers cited decreased capacity and lack of training due to conflict as an impediment to effective extension services (Abi-Ghanem et al., 2013). Kwapong and Nkonya (2012) examined the perspectives of officers from a range of extension providers in post-conflict Uganda, including officers from the public system, the public-private National Agricultural Advisory Service (NAADS), NGO providers, and private extension officers. Again, officers in all schemes reported capacity building and in-service training to improve service delivery as their biggest needs, with gaps related to post-conflict conditions. Similar instances were found in Mozambique (Cunguara & Moder, 2011) and Timor Leste (Moore et al., 2013).

Purpose and Objectives

This research was part of a larger study that examined challenges and opportunities to improve service delivery to small-scale farmers in post-conflict Liberia. The purpose of this study was to explore the capacity of Ministry of Agriculture personnel and NGO workers. Specifically, the objectives were to: (a) describe the human resource capacities of Ministry of Agriculture personnel and NGO workers to deliver extension services to small-scale farmers, and (b) identify organizational barriers impacting the capacities of Ministry of Agriculture personnel and NGO workers to deliver extension services to small-scale farmers.

Methods

This study used an interpretivist theoretical perspective, constructionist epistemology, and basic qualitative design under the umbrella of qualitative inquiry.

This research design allowed the study to focus on the meanings that respondents ascribed to experiences within Liberia extension and to better understand the overall system and services (Creswell, 2013).

The population for this study included Ministry of Agriculture and NGO personnel in Liberia. The population for the MoA consisted of 134 extension staff that included administrative personnel located in Monrovia, regional subject matter specialists, along with County Agricultural Coordinators (CACs) and District Agricultural Extension Officers (DAOs) in each of Liberia's 15 counties (MoA, 2007). At the time of reporting, 60 international and domestic NGOs provided extension services to Liberian farmers and operated in all counties (McNamara et al., 2011). The total number of NGO personnel was fluid even during data collection, which made it impossible to quantify this portion of the study's population.

Purposive sampling and the maximum variation method were used to generate a sample that represented all hierarchical levels of the MoA and key INGOs and domestic NGOs. INGOs included USAID's Food and Enterprise Development (FED) program along with ACDI/VOCA and ZOA, two of FED's partners. Domestic NGOs included the Community of Hope Agricultural Project (CHAP), Farmers' Union Network of Liberia (FUNL), the United Methodist Compound Agricultural Project (UMCAP), and 4-H Liberia. Farmers were identified via convenience sampling to provide contextual perspectives (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorensen, 2010).

MoA respondents representing all 15 Liberian counties were accessed at a centralized training in Bong County, expanding the study's scope and allowing for respondents to provide a range of

perspectives on the delivery of services. Similarly, presence at a centralized training allowed inclusion of NGO representatives from all 15 counties. The MoA, all INGOs, and several domestic NGOs sampled provided a national perspective, while CHAP and UMCAP only contributed input from Montserrado and Nimba Counties respectively. The final sample included 13 Ministry of Agriculture and 16 NGO personnel representing seven NGOs, along with 39 farmers.

A questionnaire for semi-structured interviews was created to guide data collection, and content was determined by several sources (e.g. McNamara et al., 2011; MoA, 2007). The questionnaire included eight open-ended and five closed-ended questions grouped into sub-themes of agricultural background, extension background, extension service delivery, participatory extension, pluralistic extension, and the future of extension. The questionnaire was reviewed by faculty from a U.S. university and representatives of the Liberian Ministry of Agriculture and the FED program. The final questionnaire was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Florida.

Semi-structured interviews were primarily conducted at respondents' workplaces, although both groups of respondents were also interviewed at in-service trainings and in the field to accommodate their schedules and responsibilities. Interviews lasted between five minutes and one hour depending on the respondents' willingness to converse with the lead researcher. Data were audio-recorded and hand-written notes were also taken on the instrument. Per IRB regulations, identifiers were removed from all data, and respondents were then assigned a code number to signify their category (e.g. MoA personnel as M01, NGO worker as N01, farmer as F01) (Ary et al., 2010). The

study also gathered data through observations, research note-taking, memoing, and daily research journaling during data collection (Creswell, 2013).

Data analysis was conducted using the Straussian (1987) approach to traditional grounded theory. Following transcription, data were analyzed using a three-step coding process to identify the principle themes and show commonalities from a range of respondent perspectives (Creswell, 2013).

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) trustworthiness framework was used to establish rigor. A variety of strategies helped to maximize credibility, including data triangulation by interviewing multiple respondents representing different organizations at different administrative levels, member-checking responses through a summary meeting with MoA stakeholders, prolonged periods (two months) of close engagement with respondents in the field, and peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability was achieved through thick description that included extensive descriptive narrative and representative quotes with the study's findings. Extensive memoing and research journaling were used to maximize dependability and confirmability and allow for auditing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

Human Resource Capacities of Ministry of Agriculture Personnel and NGO Workers

This category was divided into two sub-categories: (a) technical and andragogical capacities, and (b) professional development of field staff.

Technical and andragogical capacities. Liberia extension workers required both knowledge of technical information and teaching methodologies to effectively serve small-scale farmers. "There's the technical component and also

there's the communication aspect of relaying that technical information to the farmer," explained N15. Officers with strong technical and interpersonal skills provided quality services to farmers while less knowledgeable officers struggled to serve their clientele. However, the human resource capacities of extension personnel differed between the MoA and NGO sector.

In general, MoA extension personnel lacked both technical knowledge and andragogical training. While some field-level officers were quite knowledgeable, the majority of officers were ignorant of modern production methods and lacked up-to-date technical information (M01, M02). For example, one DAO had never heard of intercropping (M12) while a MoA rice specialist was ignorant of the System of Rice Intensification (M04). This knowledge gap also caused an inability to adequately answer farmers' questions (F15). "They don't know the questions," complained F17. As a result, farmers were unlikely to consult Ministry officers with technical issues (F05, F13).

While most MoA officers lacked technical capacities, many demonstrated high andragogical knowledge. Respondents talked about the need for trust-building (M04), accommodating different learning styles (M01, M13), and utilizing different teaching methods (M05, M07). However, findings suggested officers developed andragogical knowledge through individual experience and study, not through planned MoA trainings. This left less motivated officers deficient in teaching skills. Finally, field-level MoA officers who displayed above-average technical and andragogical skills were often drawn away by better-paying INGOs, further lessening the capacity of the MoA officer base (M01, N02, N06).

Lack of technical knowledge and andragogical capacity was most acute

among CACs and older DAOs who were educated prior to the war and demonstrated a severely outdated understanding of modern agricultural issues. For example, CACs demonstrated total ignorance of even the basic principles of climate change and potential adaptation strategies, and one CAC described the "new extension model we call the Farmer Field School," even though the approach has existed for decades.

In contrast, NGO extension personnel were far more knowledgeable and educated than their MoA counterparts. Many Liberian FED officers (e.g. N03, N04, N12) possessed Bachelors-level agriculture degrees or higher, mainly from Liberian universities, with years of experience in extension. Officers also received intensive pre-service training on the technical aspects of the value chain to which they would be assigned along with training on adult and non-formal education principles (N09). One FED officer (N03) described using a "randomized complete block design" on farmers' demonstration fields, suggesting an understanding of research and evaluation methods.

Even domestic NGO personnel demonstrated high knowledge and skill levels. Officers at UMCAP (e.g. N13) described up-to-date and modern agricultural practices learned from international partners, while the FUNL (N10) showed a strong understanding of andragogy and used participatory extension approaches called "listening clubs" to serve female farmers.

Professional development of field staff. Technical capacity was also found to be highly tied to the practices of professional development. Most respondents agreed that officers needed in-service training to work effectively with Liberian farmers. "You have to be updated. So you need, at least every three months, to be taken to another training, to have every type of

improved knowledge to carry back to the farmer,” explained N07.

The MoA heavily emphasized in-service professional development to address gaps in technical knowledge among their personnel, although the Ministry itself lacked the capacity to provide this service (M01). Instead, through collaboration with INGOs and specifically the FED program, MoA officers were able to receive technical training along with their NGO peers (M04, M08). Many trainings were open to extension personnel from multiple agencies (N01), as observed in a cassava workshop that included officers from ACDI/VOCA, FED, ZOA, and the MoA. Smaller NGOs (e.g. FUNL, UMCAP) also sent personnel to INGO trainings (N10, N13).

Also, field-level NGO officers often included MoA extension personnel as learners in workshops they taught. Several respondents (e.g. F15, N06) indicated that MoA officers and technicians did take advantage of these opportunities. However, one extension administrator (N15) questioned the value of these trainings in preparing extensionists because the technical content taught was simplified for consumption by farmers.

Beyond facilitating in-service training, the MoA was successful at supporting exemplary DAOs and field-level officers (M05, M13). Commonly this involved sending personnel abroad to receive advanced degrees in priority areas. “We got six to seven persons out there getting their Masters and PhDs in different aspects of [agricultural science],” explained a MoA administrator (M03). MoA personnel granted this opportunity described benefitting personally and professionally (M04, M12). Farmers working under these individuals (e.g. F15, F16, F32, F35) were also much more positive about the services they received and their collaborations with the MoA than other farmers interviewed.

Organizational Barriers Impacting Capacity of MoA Personnel and NGO Workers

Organizational factors also affected the capacity of extension workers. Several respondents (e.g. M01, M13, N15) indicated that poor coverage placed an additional burden on officers, who were each tasked with serving between 1,000 and 5,000 farmers. Again, this issue was most acute within the MoA. “We have limited manpower in the field. . . We need to hire other people,” stated M04. However, financial limitations within the Ministry were a constraint to expanding the number of field-level officers (M01, M04).

Respondents also cited the possibility to increase the number of field-level MoA staff by incorporating NGO extension officers after NGO contracts expire (M01, M13). “At the end of the project maybe if the Ministry has the capacity we can absorb those people,” stated M02. Respondent N01 believed this would provide a supply of ready-trained extensionists with high levels of expertise and practical experience, thereby improving both coverage and institutional capacity. Some NGO respondents expressed support for a move to the Ministry. “If I had the opportunity I want to work with the Ministry, because when you are working with the Ministry you are permanently employed,” stated N04. Other NGO officers were reluctant to move to the MoA due to bureaucracy, low salaries, and a lack of upwards mobility (N03, N07).

While addressing the quantity of field-level officers was extremely important, the Ministry of Agriculture was also found to be in need of re-examining ways to contemporize their workforce. Many MoA extension administrators were older, had worked in extension from before the war, and had remained in their positions over the long-term (M02, M13). Other administrators

and CACs were political appointments not based on capacity in the field of agriculture or extension (M01). For example, one CAC was moved from the Ministry of Planning and appointed to lead Liberia's most populous county despite having no agricultural background.

Mechanisms to promote and reward outstanding extension personnel were also lacking (N02). This limited the upwards mobility for young, promising public extension workers but also compromised the ability of the MoA to successfully develop modern technical and andragogical capacities (M13, N14). Over the long-term and especially as INGOs leave, respondents believed this could create a problematic dichotomy between older, entrenched MoA personnel and younger, progressive NGO personnel who will become increasingly involved in the sector (N15).

In addition to increasing the involvement of younger extensionists, respondents felt the MoA should also incorporate more women into its operations (M01, M02, M13). At the time of data collection, NGOs employed more female officers (~30%) than the MoA (10.7%) even as both service providers increasingly worked with female farmers. Efforts were being made to balance the gender disparity. "We are really trying to encourage the employment of more female extension workers," explained one MoA administrator (M02). These factors suggested the greater female employment could be seen in the near future.

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

Officers showed both positive and negative professional characteristics that may influence the present and future delivery of extension services in Liberia. Technical knowledge was a constraint for many officers, but especially for those

employed by the Ministry of Agriculture. Inclusion in INGO training did appear to provide a basic level of technical knowledge to MoA officers, although low access to up-to-date information, competing priorities, and high farmer-to-officer ratios negatively affected their ability to serve farmers. This left many officers unable to answer producers' questions or to solve farmers' problems in a timely manner.

Beyond technical abilities, field-level officers operating in an increasingly participatory extension need high andragogical, facilitation, and interpersonal capacities, especially to implement the Farmer Field School model (Ganpat, 2013; Sulaiman & Davis, 2012). Positive interpersonal skills were demonstrated by both the MoA and NGO sector, although the MoA lacked andragogical abilities relative to NGO counterparts.

Overall, these differences resulted in low technical and training capacity of MoA officers compared to NGO officers. Capacity differences also repositioned MoA officers as deferential to their more-capable peers, even as they were often partners in implementing programs. However, the long-term success of farmer training will depend on MoA officers' ability to develop the skills needed to lead these programs following INGOs' transition away from service delivery.

The implications for Liberia are two-fold. First, low officer capacity can lead to disenfranchisement with agricultural extension and farmers not seeking advisory services for production needs (World Bank, 2012). Large-scale farmers instead find information through producer organizations or input suppliers, although this is unlikely given the state of the private sector in Liberia, while small-scale farmers seek family, neighbors, or elders for agricultural advice (Feder et al., 1999). Second, farmers may return to traditional methods with lower

production potential, leading to lessened impacts on poverty, hunger, and development (FAO, 2013; Swanson et al., 1997). Additionally, farmers may leave the sector and become food consumers rather than producers, which would further increase the demand on Liberian farmers and creates greater importation and food insecurity (Tsimpo & Wodon, 2008).

The Ministry of Agriculture should rebalance its personnel to represent modern extension realities. This could include increasing the percentage of female personnel, especially at the field level, along with the incorporation of younger officers into positions with upwards mobility. One possibility is to incorporate former NGO officers, although retention will require competitive salaries, achievable advancement opportunities, and support for transportation and basic work-related needs that reduce the amount of money officers spend of their own salaries towards operations, making their take-home pay more appealing (Kutilek, 2000).

The Ministry of Agriculture should also pursue solutions to improve coverage and improve service quality at low cost. Streamlining officers' planning and reporting responsibilities could create more time to do actual extension work (World Bank, 2012). Also, training farmer leaders in technical as well as extension skills could better prepare them as informal extensionists to expand coverage at minimal cost to service providers (Sulaiman & Davis, 2012). Finally, efforts to improve print material dissemination and increase the use of radio and other information communication technologies could improve services and address coverage gaps (Swanson & Rajalahti, 2010).

Extension service providers should also focus heavily on building the capacity of field-level personnel. Sending exceptional DAOs abroad to receive advanced degrees

should continue, but with a mandate that returning DAOs train their peers with the technical skills they learn. Also, the Ministry must fully invest in utilizing INGO partners to train their own officers by removing financial and logistical barriers that currently limit participation. Failure to take advantage of these professional development opportunities will cost far more in the long term as the MoA will need to find other ways to develop the capacity of its officers. At the same time, INGO support for MoA officers' professional development should be more deliberate as a feature of their mandate to build institutional capacity. Rather than educating MoA officers as a side-effect of participation in trainings for other audiences, the NGO sector could create and implement unique trainings designed to address the specific technical deficiencies of the MoA.

Improving extension skills in andragogy and interpersonal relations are also recommended for both MoA and NGO officers. Transitions towards participatory extension models reposition officers as facilitators rather than technical experts (Ganpat, 2013; Sulaiman & Davis, 2012). Developing officers' skills in these areas is therefore essential to operating a pluralistic and participatory extension system in Liberia.

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