

Extension Worker Competencies Needed for Effective Management of Self-Help Groups (SHG) in Gombe State

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ABSTRACT

Inadequate number of competent extension workers in Nigeria has made the work very tedious and resulted to poor performance in the field. The regulatory agencies were found to be training and retraining the personnel on various areas of the extension service, but still, extension workers were found lacking the skills required for self-help groups' (SHGs) formation, management and evaluation, which resulted to non-availability of the groups in some communities or low performance where they are found. This paper discusses competencies of the extension worker in terms of knowledge, skills, attitude and personal characteristics that can be acquired or developed, with specific focus on identifying the competencies required by both baseline extension workers and their supervisors on initiating, forming, managing and evaluating SHGs. Delphi method was used in the study and the result revealed that 28 competencies are required to effectively build solid and formidable SHGs. These competencies were categorized into four main groups namely; organizational tradition and guidance, leadership building, system or style, social and external personal skills, and resource management skills, for easy training and assimilation of the extension workers. The paper recommends carrying out training of extension workers systematically; especially in group activities since the SHGs is their main tool of work. Also, to enhance the competency of the extension workers, professional values and training opportunities directly related to the needs of the extension worker should be stressed.

Keywords: Extension worker, competencies, self-help groups (SHGs)

INTRODUCTION

The number of competent and professional extension educators is clearly inadequate in most developing countries (IFAD, 2011; FAO 1990) which poses a great challenge to the strategy to be used in ensuring that human potentials are fully utilized in extension within the developing countries. Extension worker is a person who is technically knowledgeable and skilful in handling people excellently. In some instances, extension workers are referred to as social mobilization officers, facilitators or development partners (Bichi, 2010). However, in rural communities, depending on the needs of the community, extension worker is an all-rounder, being a teacher/facilitator, problem solver, care giver, project manager, leader, middleman and above all, a role model. Moreover, extension workers link the research centres to the end users of the research findings or new innovation by staying with the community members and working with them at all facets of technology implementation to ensure maximum adoption, which are all in line with the community culture, norms and values.

Presently, in terms of training among the Nigerian organizations, extension especially in agriculture has been paid the least attention (Bajoga, 2011a). The pre-service training extension worker in Nigeria grossly inadequate and

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the in-service training is mainly ad hoc and does not address the needs of the changing situations in extension work (Bajoga, 2011a). The absence of self-help groups (SHGs) in most farming communities is worrisome, especially areas that have extension workers who are trained in group dynamics and are expected to carry out most of the educational programs in groups (Abu-Mus'ab, 2009). According to FAO's (2011) estimation, one in every five economically active farmers has the opportunity of getting extension service in Nigeria, while the ratio between extension staff-to-farmer is about 1:2000 (GSADP, 2014). In this kind of situation, use of groups or cluster is highly necessary to reach the minimum 78% coverage. With the inadequate number of extension worker and low capacity to function, one can easily draw inference on the reason why extension organizations perform below expectation in Nigeria (Shitu, 2011).

According to the FAO (2006), extension workers are faced with high and very complex demand because of new trends in agriculture, health, industry and cooperatives that are directly related to other socio-demographic factors, such as; age, population, gender and environmental issues. Baseline extension workers are the key drivers in ensuring that changes within the new emerging trends are achieved efficiently. Formal, informal training and other retraining programs must be enhanced to boost the capacity of the extension workers, so that they will be able to conduct independent or group educational activities wherever they are. However, extension educators must execute diverse roles to demonstrate their competencies in various areas. Robbin (2001) identified communication, knowledge of concepts, human handling, emotional intelligence and industry based knowledge as areas of core competence in extension work. Similarly, Cooper and Graham (2001) suggested seven essential competencies for extension workers, namely, 'program planning, implementation and evaluation, public relations, personal and professional development, staff relations, personal skills, management responsibility and work habits' (p.6).

More importantly, extension workers require knowledge and skills in group management such as the conventional group dynamics, conflict resolution and management, resource management, team building, leadership promotion, decentralization and group evaluation skills (Abu-Mus'ab, 2009; Neda, 2009; Le Ngoch, 2008). These skills are essential in extension service because they imbibe the spirit of self-help, promote unity, improve socialization, promote mutual cohesion and trust, increases volunteerism spirit, facilitate rapid positive change, increases farm outputs (Yadav, 2011), and in the long run, peace, stability and sustainable community development is guaranteed. However, if these benefits are not derived as a result of extension workers in ability to perform as expected, other consequences may arise, where communities may be living in disarray, conflicts and clashes may occur, survival of the fittest will be instituted, security of lives and property will only be a rhetoric, and development efforts will be holistically retarded and tarnished.

Ensle (2005) suggested that administrators in extension work needs to know the values and needs of all extension workers under their jurisdiction, if possible based on age and experience to enable them to plan for long-term success and avoid unnecessary waste. This is due to the likelihood of the younger ones in the system spending more time with family and friends than in the working environment. According to Harder (2010), for professional and personal development, experience is the most important. In view of the above and many more exigencies, this paper focuses on identifying competencies needed by extension workers for effective initiation, formation, management and evaluation of SHGs they are to work with, within their area of primary assignment.

Competency and Extension Worker

The concept of competency has suffered many debates from different scholars depending on the context of usage. As such, the concept is viewed, explained or described based on needs and areas of study (Stone, 2010). Wisconsin Cooperative Extension (2002) viewed competency as the possession of adequate skills, knowledge and attitudes that can facilitate and make extension program be of high quality. Competencies required by extension agents to effectively discharge their duties especially those related to forming groups and ensuring their sustainability include personal characteristics such as integrity and self-motivation (Roberts et al., 2007). In view of the above, therefore, competency simply means the ability to perform certain tasks or possess necessary quantitative and qualitative skills, knowledge and attitude to accomplish a particular task or group of tasks.

Furthermore, competency is directly associated with extension work, because the ability of extension workers to achieve set program objectives depends solely on the quality of skills, knowledge and attitude they possess (Swanson, 2006), in other words, the professional and personal characteristics that will lead to successful or high performance in discharge of duties. Mitchell (2002) advised all extension personnel to acquire individual strengths, capabilities as an instructor, expertise in information and communication technology and proficiency in their academic specialty. Moreover, in an extension program, the extension worker is the most essential feature towards success or otherwise. In other words, the most important and valuable personnel in extension program

are the extension workers. As such, their competency needs have to be treated with utmost priority in any training activity (Mitchell, 2002).

The aforementioned can be achieved through designing an evaluation mechanism that will ascertain the competency needs individually, in terms of skills, knowledge and attitudes. A competency needs assessment tool that will identify special and general needs should be employed, so that a holistic competency approach can be used to provide the necessary requirements. The competency of extension worker in SHGs inessential for the survival of the whole extension program (Bichi, 2010b). In the context of this study, competency includes such characteristics that are seen as personal or are individualistic and natural which are considered as inherent competencies possessed by the extension worker that can also be used in ensuring effective delivery.

Purpose and Objectives

The main purpose of this article is to identify professional or personal competencies perceived as important and required by the baseline extension workers in extension program. Specifically, the paper made an attempt to define the competencies required for self-help groups' (SHGs) formation and management in Nigeria.

METHODS AND TECHNIQUES

To ensure that the competencies are conventional, globally accepted and locally feasible, the paper uses Delphi technique which was found very useful to reach consensus between groups. The Delphi technique emanated first from the handwork of Rand Corporation in the 1950s. Ulschak (1983) stated that the procedure is mainly used in goal setting, policy investigation and forecasting. But its usage in the field of extension education research is basically in curriculum development. However, the technique was utilized by different scholars to arrive at competencies that are more essential in different fields of human endeavours (Martin & Frick, 1998; Shinn & Smith, 1999). The Delphi procedure requires the use of specialists in specific and diverse areas of knowledge and skills to arrive at an agreement or reach consensus regarding the answer to a particular or sequence of question(s).

Three rounds are necessary to reach an agreement between 9 experts in self-help, extension, sociology and volunteerism. Proposed guiding principle by Linstone and Turoff (1975) for carrying out a Delphi study was strictly followed. The panel of experts consists of experienced extension workers, leaders of self-help groups, volunteerism specialist, donor agencies representatives and members of the academics from the sociology department. These experts were selected based on their previous records, passion for self-help work, level of involvement in volunteerism and the research they conducted in the area.

First Round

In the first round, the team of experts were asked to identify two to four competencies they feel most important and needed by extension workers to form self-help groups in the places they are assigned to. A competency was defined as the attitude, characteristics, motive, knowledge or skill that leads to high performance in a given task. All the nine members of the panel of experts responded in the first round, which resulted to 100% response.

Second Round

Academicians with experience in self-help and volunteerism were given the proclamations in all responses from the First Round to examine and identify regularly appearing items, and merge related statements. Originality and value of the panel of experts was not changed in terms of wordings, interpretation, clarification and meaning. The outcomes from the critical merger of the related statements were used in creating the instrument to be used for the second round. In round two, the colloquium of experts place their power of strength and level of agreement for each statement item on a five-point Likert-type scale with 1 = strongly disagree and 5 =strongly agree. To ensure consistency, all the nine members of the panel of experts who had responded in the first round also responded in the second round.

Third Round

Round three was mainly introduced to begin the process of agreement among the panel of experts. The statements with highest scores (agree or strongly agree) and those from majority of expert members in the Second round were kept aside to be used in the Third round. The revised instrument was sent to the specialists who were requested to re-assess the consistency and relevance of each statement from the second Round. Eight out of the nine panels of experts responded in this round. Dillman's Total Design Method (2000) was employed for non-response follow-

up. The researcher selected the responses using frequency distributions on majority of appearance with at least two-third.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Competencies

In the first instance, the group of experts came up with 68 competency statements items. Harmonizing the similar statements items resulted in having only 28 competencies required by the extension agents to form and effectively manage self-help groups, year in year out. Final agreement was reached in the third round, where all the 28 competency statement items were retained because of their relevance.

Three academicians who were also members of the panel of experts subjected these statement items to unstructured Q-sorting procedure. Kerlinger (1986) describes an unstructured Q-sort as ‘a set of items pull together without precise consideration to the variables or factors underlying the items’ (p.98). Moreover, they agreed on the value of each statement and grouped them accordingly. The Q-sorting procedure finally resulted in the advancement of four simpler constructs. The grouping and their accompanying statements items are as follows:

TABLE 1
Organizational Tradition and Guidance

S/N	This includes the skills in assessing
i	needs of members, the group, and the organization
ii	turning desires into ideas and ideas into action.
iii	communicating the institutional image to stakeholders effectively.
iv	dedicating to the image of the institution.
v	innovative use of modern gadgets to ensure impact of the program.
vi	long-term strategic planning (future viewing)
vii	planning and organizing within the short-range.
viii	standing-in as an in-house advisor to the SHG executives within the institution.
ix	creating an encouraging atmosphere in which SHG members can acquire and utilize.
X	developing positive attitude and willingness to help others succeed.
xi	working with group members and motivate them effectively.
xii	trusting members in all affairs to get the job done.

In Table 1, competencies identified under the *organizational tradition and guidance* construct includes general planning and needs assessment skills, tactical or specific planning skills, dedication to and maintaining contact with the group; and institutional mission and vision to supervisors, members, and other stakeholders. It also includes assisting members to understand the philosophy behind extension work, activities that will create atmosphere of trust between the facilitators and the SHG members and also the ability to motivate group members make sacrifices through volunteerism consciously. According to Fisher and Cole (1993), extension and other SHG managers wear many caps besides that of spreading information among clientele. They are the most common and closest people to the members, and they are the link between the members, the group, donors and the media in terms of interaction or public relations.

TABLE 2
Leadership Building System or Style

	This includes the skills in:
i	working in partnership with others.
ii	the leadership position is occupied based expertise in case of specialization role.
iii	being thoughtful and utilizing group changes, individual differences and methods of building a team.
iv	considering the structure in which activities are conducted always.
v	readiness to delegate authority and allow others to control.

Based on Table 2, *Leadership building system or style* competencies include having knowledge of the group and the institutional structure, delegating authority and rotating control in the group and the whole organization through participatory and partnership mechanisms. It also involves possessing knowledge and in depth skills to

form and maintain formidable teams to solve problems or to overcome challenges. Power sharing in SHG management involves assigning some responsibilities to members within the group based on their expertise and potentials, which will boost their morale and promote personal development. Teamwork and respect for one another is another important task here. The construct is directed towards delegation of authority among SHG members and promoting internal democracy, which will uphold justice and equity among them.

TABLE 3
Social-external Personal Skills

	This includes the skills in:
i	predicting and managing change from any angle of the group.
ii	creative thoughts to achieve specific objectives.
iii	communication: verbal, non-verbal, listening.
iv	resolving conflict-resolution and management issues.
v	developing the total person.

As mentioned in Table 3, the *socio-personal skills* sub-group involves knowledge that facilitates positive relationships within SHG members and also skills to help critically identify and approach issues with objective mind, predicts and manages change. Panel of experts emphasizes the utilization and expansion of skills in listening, despite communication skills being paramount to the extension worker. An extension worker cannot be good speaker without being a good listener. In extension work, change is constant and the predominant aspects for extension viability is by all positive means to effect change, and the ability to foresee the need for change and plan for it within short, medium and long-term period. Moreover, in working with SHGs, it is important to clearly identify genuine and sustainable ways of empowering the members, through forming external linkages with sister organizations that are more experienced in the economic, social and psychological components of the empowerment. This will gradually increase their confidence to associate freely and decide on what to do, why, and when, because they know how.

TABLE 4
Resources Management Skills

	This includes skills in:
i	understanding roles and giving proper advices volunteers in extension.
ii	screening and employing members.
iii	enlightening and creating awareness of members to the SHG needs.
iv	defending members, the group and the organization.
v	evaluating SHG member efforts and accomplishments.
vi	recognizing and in retaining volunteers.

Table 4 shows competencies under *Resources Management skills* involving the functions essential towards forming and maintaining the SHG, such as recruiting, screening, training, recognizing, and evaluating members and the group. These competencies mainly exist in most group management models and are regularly used in extension trainings to address management skills in group work. The feedback mechanism needs to be emphasized as the construct is not only restricted to human resources. Material resources cannot be seen as complementary but rather a partner that needs to be developed together.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The results from this study clearly indicate that the extension competencies required to build formidable SHGs are mostly not different from other models used to train extension workers in group dynamics and conflict resolution, especially when compared to the common linear model of extension training by Davis (2008) and the training manual of FAO (2006). However, the emphasis made by the panel of experts highlighted other substantial areas in SHGs, such as the aspects of promoting volunteerism and needs assessment to be conducted for both the extension worker and the SHG members so that holistic development can be achieved in the communities.

It is very pertinent to note that due to challenges in the Nigeria's economy, extension workers and other development partners should, as a matter of urgency, use the SHGs to promote the spirit of volunteerism especially in youths. Although the role of volunteers especially as leaders is not clearly understood or valued (Connors,

1995), the development of leadership skills at all levels will be enhanced through training and retraining, coupled with necessary demonstrations. Culp and Nolan (1999) identified continuing professional development of volunteers engaged in SHGs or extension work as one of the most critical areas that require urgent attention.

The implication is that extension worker competency is very critical especially in Nigeria as a developing country, towards enhancing performance of SHGs. Reports repeatedly demonstrate that baseline workers require more on the job and in-service training to equip them with modern approaches to enable them initiate, manage and evaluate the activities of the groups they are working with, effectively.

The following steps are necessary for the employers of extension workers to deal with urgently, to enable Extension workers perform in the area of SHGs development, and to promote volunteerism.

- (1) Systematic and strategic institutional development in self-help group (SHG) and volunteer potentials is highly required within the four groups of competencies identified in this study. It is also very pertinent to pay attention on various methods and strategies towards evaluation and enhancing skills in organizational tradition and guidance, leadership building, system or style, social and external personal skills and resource management skills.
- (2) Extension institutions and organizations should make the aforementioned knowledge, skills and attitudes as pre-requisites, so that the baseline workers are always well prepared and up to date.
- (3) The regulatory agencies, extension organizations and other sister bodies should ensure that the necessary resources are prioritized in their development plans. The synergy will reduce the rate of bureaucracy and saves time of operations.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This article covers only competencies that are directly associated to initiation, formation, management and evaluation of self-help groups (SHG) by the extension worker. Therefore, similar studies may be conducted in other areas such as SHG sustainability, personality of the extension worker, performance in group effectiveness, resource management in voluntary groups and motivating factors to form, join or use of groups in extension work. This will expand the horizon in understanding the general and specific competencies required for each task and when it is required.

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