



# Business, Management and Economics Research

ISSN(e): 2412-1770, ISSN(p): 2413-855X

Vol. 3, No. 6, pp: 62-68, 2017

URL: <http://arpgweb.com/?ic=journal&journal=8&info=aims>

## Action Theory as a Tool for Causal Investigation in Qualitative Research: The Analysis of the Actions of Local Politicians and Administrators Involved in the Delivery of Agricultural Extension Services in Tanzanian

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**Abstract:** Causal explanation of social action has been critical to modern and classic sociology because the most influential causal law of regularity has failed to be fruitful in explaining causal properties and the processes which form social action. Nevertheless, since the development of social action theory by Max Weber in 1926, there has been meager development concerning its use for causal investigation in qualitative research. Few researchers who attempt to use it do not satisfactorily capture the issue of context and process which connect the events. This article uses comparative case study research to analyze the actions of local politicians and administrators involved in the planning and decision making concerning the delivery of agricultural extension services in Tanzania. To be more precise, the analysis focus on the way institutional context determine the planning process on allocation of resources and the actions of officials involved in the planning of the services.

**Keywords:** Action theory; Causal investigation; Qualitative research; Agricultural extension services; Local public administration.

### 1. Introduction

Causal investigation by using social actions has been central to modern and classic sociology because the most influential causal theory- a law of regularity has failed to be fruitful for the study of social action. This is because the causal law assumes that causality is present if two events always occur together or are constantly conjoined. This means that when the first event occurs, it must be followed by the second event. In nut shell, this law suggests three conditions which must be fulfilled for causality to be in place: first, the cause and effect must be contiguous in time and space, second, the cause must be prior to the effect and third there must be a constant conjunction between the cause and effect (Maxwell, 2004). Nevertheless, this law has failed to recognize the meaning of the word causality itself which implies the relationship between events. To be more precise, it fails to capture causal properties and the processes in which social actions arise (Ekstrom, 1992).This imply that causal mechanisms can be explained by events and process that connect them. The explanation can not be a linear variable analysis but a single cause, the number of contributing factors and their relationship (Richie and Lewis, 2003) .Second, some of the information for causal explanation cannot be observed and that the outcome can be measured with error. The presence of errors is likely to obstruct the method of detecting constant conjunctions. And lastly is linear causal relation between x and y. The linear causal relation neglects the causal mechanism and situations where the events take place (Maxwell, 2004). Therefore to account for this pattern of causal mechanism and its recurrent linkages, it is necessary to study and understand the meaning which is essential to understand the human action (Max Weber, 1930) The study of action builds an explanation on the way different meaning and understanding come together to influence the outcome. The meaning and understanding form a basis for explaining the causal relation.

Nevertheless, despite these critics, there is little which has been done pertaining to systematic study of action theory in different contexts and policy sectors and its use for causal investigation. Apart from that, the little research which has been done so far like that of Maxwell (2004) in education research focus on western countries and America. This implies that the in-depth research concerning action theory for causal investigation particularly in developing countries is still thin. In order to fill this gap, this article provides systematic study of action theory of local politicians and administrators involved in the delivery of agricultural extension services in Tanzania.

In order to establish action theory of these actors, I first investigated the meaning that they attach to their actions through investigation of the causes of their actions. The cause is the reason that the actors attach to their actions. These include different categories: goals or interests of actors that result from their drive to fulfill certain needs;

knowledge and rules that provide meaning to the world and indicate which behavior is allowed, appropriate or sensible in a certain situation; and conditions that create opportunities and constraints for behavior (Hall and Taylor, 1996; Huizenga, 1995; March and Olsen, 1987; Powell and Dimaggio, 1991). Therefore I speak of causality if actors act in a certain way *in order* to conform to certain rules, to achieve certain goals that are given by the institutional context and/or to deal with conditions such as the scarcity of certain resources (Huizenga, 1995). This means that to discover the causal relationship between behaviors on the one hand, and the institutional context (formal and informal institutions) and conditions (resources allocation) on the other, it is necessary to reconstruct what is called the specific action theory of an actor. An action theory is the representation of all the reasons an actor has to behave or to decide in a certain way (Huizenga, 1995).

## 2. The Administrative System of Local Public Administration in Tanzania

In Tanzania, local Public Administration is organized in form of district councils, Municipalities, town councils and village councils. Over the past 100 years, centralized systems of public administration have alternated with decentralized systems. In 1926, under British rule local native authorities were installed. The *native authorities' ordinance* established a form of local government and empowered local chiefs to exercise substantial executive, judicial and administrative authority (Tidemand, 2010). At the time of independence, Tanzania inherited the local government system left by the British (Mollel, 2010). Service delivery by local government had a lack of capacity in finance and human resources, thus proving to be inefficient and not responsive to local needs. In 1972 a centralized system of service delivery was set up. In this system, central government and regional deconcentrated agencies became the main providers of services (Ngwilizi, 2002).

When the centralized system of service delivery also failed to produce the desired output, local government was reintroduced as the main vehicle for service delivery and development. In 1982, legislation established districts in rural areas and municipalities and cities in urban areas. Elected councils were empowered to collect revenues, enact by-laws, and determine local budgets and plans (Tidemand, 2010). Since then, several reforms have been introduced to strengthen decentralization. The most renowned concrete reform program started in the year 2000 following the enactment of the local government reform agenda of 1996 and the 1998 policy paper on Decentralization by Devolution.

The goal of the reform was to increase participation of people in decision making and local elections, giving local council's power over all local affairs and creating accountable local government. Notwithstanding, recent evaluations show that despite the reforms, service delivery does not meet the standards and expectations set at the beginning of the decentralization process. The literature offers a number of explanatory factors: the role of central government, which in practice leaves little discretion for local government; the lack of adequate revenue collection by local authorities; the inadequacy of human resources; a low level of civic education concerning citizens' rights and democratic participation; and a low capacity of managerial and leadership skills (ALAT, 2011; Mjwahuzi and Kunkuta, 2005; REPOA, 2008). Like other services, In 1999, agricultural extension services were decentralized to local government. Since then, the local departments of agriculture and livestock, instructed and supervised by the local councils, are responsible for the planning and delivery of the services. Field extension officers, educated in one of the countries' agricultural institutes, operate from the offices of the administrative sub units of local government, the wards or villages are responsible for the planning for the services. In the district or municipal offices, a number of planning officers and specialists in agriculture and livestock instruct, supervise, assist the planning process. The existing research suggests that the goals of transferring the responsibilities of agricultural extension services to local government have not been achieved. The planning for the services is still top down but how can we explain the actions of the local politicians and administrators involved in the planning of the services?

## 3. The Planning and decision making on agricultural extension services delivery

### 3.1. The Morogoro Municipal Council Case Study

The planning in Morogoro Municipality is guided by the national guidelines which imply that the actual provision of extension services must take place within the framework of national and local agricultural plans. Local governments develop a five-year strategic development plan. The local plan is guided by the National Strategy for Economic Growth and Reduction of Poverty which spells out three major clusters that a council must abide to in order to reduce poverty. These include economic growth and income poverty reduction; improved quality of life and social well-being; good governance and accountability.

The local strategic plan contains one section on agriculture, based on the information from a SWOT analysis by the department of agriculture and livestock. The analysis identifies some key strengths and weaknesses which must be addressed by the five-year strategic plan. The identification of strengths and weaknesses is conducted by the technical staff of departments who must take stock of citizen's problems at the ward level and other stakeholders like private sector and civil society organizations; they must include them in the plan and submit the draft to council committees and the full council. Nevertheless, the selection of what to include in the plan is guided by national plans. This implies that the plan must reflect national policies including the Strategy for poverty reduction and economic growth (Interviews Bigwa and Kichangani WCs)

The current plan was approved by the Morogoro municipal council in March 2011. It constitutes an agricultural sector development plan for the period 2011-2016 which identifies the targets to be reached in the year 2016 and strategies to be used. For example, one of the areas addressed by this strategy is crop production. In the first place, the municipality intends to increase maize production from 2.8 tons per hectare to 3.2 in the year 2016 through the use of improved technology, provision of extension services, subsidized agricultural input and the procurement of agricultural implements (MMC, 2011).

Although the Municipality is empowered to develop its strategic plan through SWOT analysis, the plan which was developed in 2011 was rather general and the analysis it was based on did not reflect the specific problems of farmers. For example, according to the SWOT analysis, the farmers face a problem of a lack of access to advice and agricultural information, due to a lack of incentives and inadequate working facilities for the extension officials to transfer such information to them. In the same vein, the strategies developed to face these issues and increase production are very general. They focus on general aspects such as improving agricultural technologies, improving extension services and subsidizing agricultural input but they do not show specifically how that can materialize. The lack of incentives and working facilities that the extension officers face does not feature explicitly in the plan (MMC, 2011).

The research shows that this increase in percentage was taken from the national government plan that is sent to Local Government Authorities as a guideline for planning (Interviews HoD A & LO; LO). This is also explained by the fact that the planning process must conform to the guiding manual for strategic planning and budgeting (MMC, 2011).

### 3.1.1. The Role of the Council in Developing the Strategic Plan

The strategic plan developed by officials of Morogoro Municipality in 2011 was submitted to the full council for approval. The council received a draft of the plan but did not discuss or amend it. The plan was finally approved as it stood. The research suggests that the pattern of decision making about the plan is a derivative of the councilors behavior. In the first place, they explain themselves as having insufficient skills and knowledge to discuss the plan which is technically developed. Secondly, they think that it is a job of officials to develop the plan because they know much more about central government guidelines, which guide them for its development. Thirdly, they believe that the plan was prepared based on the input of low level officials who work directly with farmers. And lastly, they believe that the plan reflects the instructions from central government which provides funds for implementation and therefore they should respect them (Interviews WCs Bigwa and Kichangani Wards; A & LDBO).

Furthermore with respect to annual plan, the district must prepare agricultural development plans every year as way of implementing strategic plan. The plans must be developed according to the formal procedure set out in the Opportunities & Obstacles to Development framework. The planning is handled by District Facilitation Teams (URT, 2000). In line with the guidelines, the process of planning agricultural services in Morogoro Municipality begins at the lowest administrative level, the street level. Once a year and upon instruction of the Municipal Director, every street organizes a special meeting for citizens to deliberate on what they feel are agricultural priorities. The process of planning and the development of projects is supposed to proceed bottom up and serve to articulate the problems and priorities of farmers. In practice, extension officers are in the lead. Extension officers present the ideas for a project to farmers for them to discuss. If the farmers launch ideas for the improvement of production or marketing, the extension officer informs them about the costs and benefits involved in the realization of such ideas and whether it will be possible to obtain funds. Both the initiatives of the extension officer and his advice concerning suggestions done by farmers are based on what he thinks conforms to central government priorities. Examples of extension officers taking initiative and trying to interest farmers in accepting certain ideas concerned a marketing project and a dairy farming project that covered three wards, Kilakala, Bigwa and Kichangani.

*We normally use different techniques like tapes and TV to demonstrate new knowledge to farmers and convince them. For example, through this, the farmers accepted to form a diary project which covers three wards namely Kilakala, Bigwa and Kichangani (Interviews WEO and WAEO Bigwa).*

This shows that although the process of planning and the development of projects is supposed to proceed bottom up to address farmer's problems and priorities, the extension officers play a leading role and serve as the voice of central government.

At the ward level, the plans and projects that emerge from the street meetings are tabled to the Ward Development Committee for discussion. The committee consists of a Ward Councilor who is a chair, the chairmen of all village councils within a ward, any person who is a member of a district council, other members invited and the Ward Executive Officer who is a secretary (URT, 2000). It is the formal role of the WADC to advise citizens to revise or drop projects, and coordinate projects developed in different streets, if necessary. In practice, it is the Ward Facilitation Team that fulfills this role. Based on the advice of the officials, representatives of citizens from different streets eventually vote for projects to be included in the plan.

*The citizens plan through their street meetings and we receive their projects but we cannot implement all. We explain to them and they make a decision on projects to be included in the plan based on their priorities (interview WAEO Bigwa).*

At the municipal level, the plans are compiled by the District Facilitation Team under the coordination of the planning officer. The team consists of the heads of departments. The officials select the projects to be included in the district agricultural development plan. The selection of projects follows the guidelines for planning and budgeting

issued by the Ministry of Finance and the President's Office Regional Administration and Local Government Authorities. These guidelines include a budget ceiling and the central government priorities which the district must abide to in the formulation of the plan. Such guidelines exist for every policy sector. There are general guidelines for agriculture, for example the requirement that the planning must include basic training, give support to farmers and aid coordination with stakeholders to implement the national Agriculture First Initiative (*Kilimo Kwanza*). They are also specific, for example plans must include the provision of small irrigation schemes; they must focus on productive investments; or that only projects for crops can be financed that add to the value chain ((URT, 2012); Interview MHO).

### 3.1.2. The Role of the Council in the Development of the Annual Plan

After the review by the regional secretariat, the draft of the plan developed must be approved by the district council. Before the plan is discussed in the full council, the draft is first submitted to council committees for discussion and deliberation on the content. The Planning and Administration Committee is primarily responsible for advising the full council; it coordinates and discusses the input from other sectoral committees. After discussion, the plan is tabled to the full council for approval. However, in the meetings where the draft plans are tabled, there is hardly any discussion about their content, the projects that are included or the allocation of the budget to these projects. Instead, the committee meetings are preoccupied by the discussion on other items like revenue collection and cash flow issues. An example is the budget meeting of 06/04/2011 with 6 members and 24 officials with an agenda to discuss about irrigation project for Mzingwa ward, but the members concentrated on income and expenditure for the education sector and thereafter approved the budget as it is. Another example is the meeting of 16/04/2014 with 11 members and 20 officials and another on 20/05/2014 with 10 members and 23 officials which indicated that the agendas of these meetings were dominated by the discussion on income and expenditure concerning market construction projects.

### 3.2. Hai District Council case study

In Hai District Council, similarly, the planning for agricultural extension services is guided by national policies and procedures. Like in Morogoro case study, the planning takes place by means of strategic and annual district agricultural development plans. The strategic plan is a general five-year plan that formulates goals for all policy sectors including agriculture and livestock.

The formulation and development of the strategic plan which covered the period 2011/2012 – 2015/2016 was dominated by district officials representing different departments of the district. In principal and according to procedures, stakeholders must be consulted in writing up the plan. But farmers' organizations and cooperatives, who are key stakeholders were not consulted. Although the ward officials were supposed to collect citizen's opinions in order to inform themselves about their priorities, this was not at their convenience. Even where they invited citizens to provide their input, the citizens themselves did not have knowledge about the plan and did not know what to contribute (interviews Rundugai and Masama Kusini WCs). It was only in the last phase of the preparation of the strategic plan that some stake holders such as community; traditional leaders and NGOs were consulted ((HDC (2011); interview DAEO).

What did take place was a SWOT analysis. However, overall, the SWOT analysis was rather general and did not focus on specific problems of the district. For agriculture, some issues which are general in character were identified as threats. This includes issues of climate change and the low adoption rate of modern agricultural technology. In fact, the formulation of strategic objectives was guided by central government policies and priorities. The officials claimed their commitment to national policies.

*"The office of the District Executive Director as a coordinator to this exercise has realized the importance of having a strategic plan that is in line with the on-going national frameworks specifically to the Five Years National Development Plan (FYDP) that was inaugurated by the President of Tanzania in June, 2011" (Hai district strategic plan 2011: VIII).*

Those involved in the decision-making explain the limited role of the council by referring to the fact that local government almost entirely depends on central government grants and the plan is subject to approval by central government. It is important that a strategic plan reflects ongoing national frameworks in order not to jeopardize the allocation of financial resources. The officials make sure that the plan conforms to national priorities and it does not make sense for the council to try and amend the plan. Councilors feel that these plans are endorsed by central government and that they have little to contribute to their development or content (Interviews Council chairperson, Rundugai ward councilor, DPO, DAEO).

Next to strategic plans covering all policy sectors, councils must also develop annual plans for each sector, including agriculture. As explained in Morogoro case, this planning process is formally supposed to be bottom up. This implies that the process has to begin at the lowest level – the village level. The process must be facilitated by district and ward teams that are organized at the district and ward level (HDC, 2012).

Practically, the planning for agricultural development begins at the village level. The village chairpersons are instructed by the district executive director to arrange for a special village assembly (Interview DAEO). The extension officials at the ward and district level who are the members of their respective facilitations teams attend the meeting. The assembly appoints a committee that consists of women, elderly and young villagers, and ward and district officials. The committee collects information with a focus on production potential. After collecting the

information, the committee presents the report in the village assembly where it is discussed (Interview Kwasadala VAEO). Then the committee advises the village assembly on the preferences of the farmers based on data collected. On the basis of the report, the village assembly identifies the list of projects to be implemented (Interviews Uduru VAEO, DAEO).

Although the farmers are supposed to suggest their priorities, the extension officials lead them by explaining the problems and opportunities associated with their choice. If the extension officials think that the project proposed by farmers cannot work or if it is inconsistent with government priorities, they change it. One of the recent government priorities relates to the principle of the value chain: projects that relate to the processing of crops have priority over projects that relate to the increase in production, because the former are assumed to add more value and result in higher income for the farmers (Interviews DAEO, DALDO, Rundugai WAEO and Rundugai VAEO).

The research shows that indeed farmers themselves are involved in the development of agricultural development plans and that through the village meetings a substantial number of farmers somehow take part. However, it is also clear that the bottom up character is very limited. First of all, the farmers and their groups are still weak and do not have the capacity to articulate their needs, let alone write project proposals that meet the requirements for funding. Officials have to assist farmers in articulating their needs and suggesting proposals for projects. Second, when it comes to concrete suggestions and the selection of project proposals, the extension officers play a dominant role, and make sure that project proposals and plans are not at odds with central government priorities and conditions attached to grants (Interviews Masama Kusini and Masama Rundugai WAEOs, Mungushi VAEO).

### **3.2.1. The Role of the Council**

After the review of the annual plan by the regional secretariat, it is presented to the council for discussion and approval. The draft of the plan is first discussed and scrutinized by council committees and finally submitted to the full council. District agricultural development plans are discussed in two council committees: first in the economic, works and environment committee and then in the planning, finance and administration committee. To establish what the exact role of the council in decision-making on the allocation of funds to projects, we analyzed minutes of council committee meetings over a number of years and observed a number of full council meetings. The research shows that when agricultural development plans were on the agenda, council committees and the full council were very much preoccupied with issues of tax collection and expenditures in general, but did not discuss, less try to amend the specifics of the agricultural development plan or the allocation of financial resources to agricultural development projects. This can be illustrated sketching what happened in a number of meetings of the most important committee, the planning, finance and administration committee.

## **4. Comparative Analysis and Discussion**

The practices of planning and budgeting for agricultural extension services in Morogoro Municipality and Hai district, show a high degree of similarity. Both in the development of the five-year strategic plans and the annual development plans, non-elected officials played a dominant role. In both cases officials carried out a SWOT analysis as prescribed by central government guidelines to underpin the strategic development plans. The analysis carried out in Hai district was very general in character identifying issues such as climate change and the low adoption rate of modern technology. The strategic plan on the other hand contained very specific and detailed targets concerning the production of crop and livestock. In Morogoro, the analysis was also general and mentioned issues such as the lack of agricultural information available to farmers. Also here, the strategic plan included precise percentages for the increase in production of crops and livestock. In general, there was no relation between the SWOT analyses on one hand and the strategic plans on the other. The targets came out of the blue or, as officials from Morogoro Municipality admitted, were formulated with an eye for the national agricultural development policies. In contrast with the plan of Morogoro Municipality, the Hai district plan contained a specification of activities to improve the quality and quantity of extension services.

In Morogoro, stakeholders, such as farmers' organizations and NGOs active in the field of agriculture were consulted but their views and opinions such as the need to increase agricultural extension services and farm implements were not reflected in the strategies. In Hai district, before the strategic plan was submitted to the council, community and traditional leaders were consulted about the overall strategic development plan, covering all policy sectors, but specific stakeholders for agriculture such as farmers' groups were not consulted. All in all, the involvement of farmers or their representatives in the development of the strategic plans was either absent or did not affect the content of the plan.

The research shows that in both local governments farmers are involved in the development of the annual district agricultural development plans. Officials follow the procedures prescribed by legislation and organize street or village assemblies, where farmers can make suggestions for projects that can contribute to the productivity or profitability of their activities. In Hai district even a quite elaborate system of consultation is in use, involving a special village committee and the village assembly. In these meetings farmers articulate their needs. Notwithstanding, the extension officials play a leading role in the process. They do so by 'educating', as they put it, the farmers about the priorities of central government and the chance of their project plans being financed. The role of the officials is even more prominent in the compilation of proposals from villages and wards into a draft for the district annual plan: projects are changed or selected so that they fit central government priorities. While at first sight the idea of bottom up planning is present in the case of the annual plans, the role of farmers is actually very limited;

as a result, the plans reflect the priorities and guidelines of central government as they are interpreted by the officials, not the preferences of the farmers.

In both local governments, the drafts of the five-year strategic and annual development plans are first submitted to the regional secretariat for review, then tabled to the council committees for advice, and subsequently submitted to the full council for approval. Our research shows that in both local governments, the council committees nor the full council discuss the plans in detail, nor do they challenge the goals, instruments or projects as proposed by the officials. Sometimes, council members ask questions for clarification. In Hai district occasionally plans give rise to a debate. But over the past years, councilors never proposed to amend the drafts, to reject some projects or include others, or to change the priorities included in the plans. All plans were approved as they had been presented to the council. The elected councilors represent a ward. However, when it comes to decide on development plans and the allocation of resources to projects, they do not represent their ward; they do not articulate the specific needs or preferences of their constituency. As a result, the priorities of central government included in the plans are not challenged, let alone substituted by local priorities.

## 5. Conclusion

The final conclusion is that all in all, the actions of local politicians and administrators are shaped by intuitional context (both formal and informal institutions) and the availability of resources. In these cases, the local politicians and administrators involved in the planning for agricultural extension services give priority to central government policies and guidelines and neglect local priorities when it comes to the planning and budgeting of these services. As a result, the preferences of the local community are not articulated and not reflected in the allocation of public extension services.

This action can be explained by the design of formal administrative system for the delivery of agricultural extension services. The administrative system has been decentralized in the sense that the local councils establish policies and plans, and that extension officials employed by local government deliver the services. Nevertheless, in other aspects the system is still quite centralistic. National policies define priorities that local governments have to abide to. Legislation prescribes that certain planning procedures must be followed and that the resulting plans and budgets need the approval of central government. As can be observed from the overviews of the budgets of Morogoro Municipality and Hai district, local revenues that local governments are free to spend as they wish, are small. For the implementation of development projects, local governments largely depend on earmarked grants, and are therefore subject to conditions set by central government.

Amongst politicians it is a shared conviction that an elected politician cannot go against the manifesto of his or her political party. The plans and budgets that are submitted to the council are considered to be in line with the manifesto of the ruling party, because they have been scrutinized by officials appointed by party. Therefore, councilors from the ruling party will simply conform to them. This of course does not apply to councilors who do not belong to the ruling party. In Hai district, where the opposition is well represented, we found that councilors from the opposition occasionally question the proposals presented to them, but in the end no amendments were ever made. Even opposition councilors perceive guidelines from national government as a law that they should respect. The fact that alternative plans can jeopardize the necessary central government approval and the subsequent allocation of funds also plays a role. Therefore the existence of centralized administrative system, a culture of upward accountability shared by appointed officials and local councilors, and a lack of financial resources that local governments can freely allocate, that explain the limited degree of democratic decision-making on agricultural extension services, and the fact that local preferences are not taken into account.

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