

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Organizational Issues in Food Security Planning

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A chapter on organizational issues in food security planning might seem superfluous. Surely, planning is a straightforward, professional process, and food security planning no exception to this rule? Planning ought to be a technical matter: about setting objectives, defining the incentive and regulatory environment, raising and distributing resources, writing projects, and providing a framework for monitoring and evaluation. Maybe so – but there are good theoretical reasons for expecting organizational problems of various kinds. More to the point, all our experience with the kind of multi-sectoral and multi-disciplinary planning required in food security tells us that many organizational problems do arise in practice.

We will start with experience, and come to the theory later. In reading about experience, however, it will be helpful at least to have in mind a checklist of themes that might be relevant. This is easily available from the extensive literature on organization and management. For example, the excellent introduction by Handy (1985) identifies the following topics as being relevant to the study of organizations:

- the motivation to work;
- roles and interactions between individuals;
- leadership;
- power and influence;
- the working of groups;
- cultures and structures;
- the management of difference.

Can this list be applied to practical cases?

To answer this question, consider a fictional – but, to many, an all too familiar – example, constructed from experience and observation in half a dozen different countries in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). This is the story of Frederick and Judith, food security planners in a typical, low-income, drought-prone and aid-dependent African country. They each have a story to tell.

Judith's story

As Head of the Food Security Office, Judith was considering her future. Should she stay and fight? Or should she follow her instinct and ask for a transfer? Sectoral

planning, perhaps, or even back to the Ministry of Health? Judith was worn out. Why was food security so difficult? And why wouldn't people cooperate?

Today had really been the last straw. She was struggling to put the final touches to the new, national Food Security Plan, and Frederick – she grimaced at the thought of his unrepentant male chauvinism – had announced a major new programme of food subsidies for the urban poor. Food subsidies! They weren't in the plan! And worse, the Ministry of Commerce and the Treasury had cooked this up on their own: neither Judith nor her staff had been consulted about the new proposals. What was the point of having a Food Security Office if it wasn't allowed to coordinate? And how could the Minister let Commerce push through a proposal like that without consulting her? That was what really hurt, Judith thought, the lack of support from her own boss.

In the beginning it had all been so different. The great drought had been a terrible affliction, but my goodness, they had worked hard during those years, and saved many lives: people from different ministries working together, central government sitting side by side with regional governments in special task forces, donor meetings every week, and the rewarding sight of the great food convoys setting off for the drought-affected areas. There was a spirit then, a real feeling that things could change.

The Government had felt it, too, she remembered – even the Minister. He had been enthusiastic when the World Financial Institution (WFI) had suggested setting up a project to prepare a national food security plan, and had welcomed her warmly to the Ministry as the national coordinator. He had really seemed to want a national strategy that would pull everything together and avoid another catastrophe.

It seemed only last week, Judith thought, though in reality it had been over three years ago. Setting up the office; welcoming the consultants from the WFI; the study tour to Sudan, Ethiopia and Zimbabwe. Of course, some of the consultants had been very inexperienced, but the work had been really intensive in those days. Judith remembered how they had 'pulled up the drawbridge' to the office and locked themselves inside, struggling to develop a conceptual model of food security, relevant to their own conditions. There had been so much to read, documents from the World Bank, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the United Nations Children's Fund and other institutions, as well as plans from other countries in Africa. Judith remembered the diagrams they had drawn to illustrate linkages in food security, the relationship between nutrition and food security and the role of different ministries. It had taken months, but finally they had produced a model – and there it was, she thought, pinned carefully to the wall above her desk, the colours slightly faded now, but still a powerful tool of analysis.

Then there had been the phase of developing plans to improve food security. The WFI had funded national and international consultants to prepare sectoral action plans. The office had seemed literally to hum with activity and Judith had spent long hours reading reports and correcting drafts. It was really a pity that the data were so poor, but still there were some good ideas, which went far beyond food security. They had had the makings not just of a plan for food security, but of a new agricultural strategy, a new rural development strategy, even a macroeconomic policy. How exciting that had been, Judith remembered; and what an effort they

had put into producing their first draft of the national plan. How wide-ranging it was; how complete; how important for the different sectoral ministries.

At last, it had been time to reveal the ideas to the rest of the government, and Judith remembered the national workshop they had convened to launch the plan. She grimaced at the memory of the work that had had to be put into organization. For weeks, it had seemed that Judith's main job was to stand over a photocopier, producing copies of papers or invitations to receptions. Still, they had all come: ministers and ambassadors, technicians and aid officials. Not all for the whole time, it was true: most had left after the first plenary and had skipped the working groups. Still, at least they had all been informed about the plan. There had been many suggestions about how to improve it – in some ways almost too many. A report had been written and Judith and her staff had been able to set out to revise the draft.

Of course, that had been a bigger job than she had expected. In fact she had been at it for several months already. The change of government hadn't helped. Not only were there new ministers to brief, but the political orientation of the government had changed quite a bit. The new policy on self-sufficiency, for example, had quite serious implications for the plan; and the structural adjustment package agreed with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Decentralization was an important theme, too, with authority being devolved to local government.

The trouble was that policy seemed to be changing so fast. Hardly a day went by without some new policy statement. And somehow the food security plan was no longer at the centre of affairs. At the beginning, after the drought, Judith had really felt that food security took centre stage in government policy making. But now?

So, should she give up, put it down to experience and go back to Health? It was difficult. Food security was a major problem, Judith was convinced. Over a quarter of all children in the country were malnourished. Drought was an ever-present threat. Surely, food security planning made sense. But if that was the case, why was it going so slowly? What had she done wrong?

Frederick's story

It was a day of achievement, a day of action. Earlier that morning, Frederick and his boss had announced a new, national programme of urban food subsidies. They were going to be a bit expensive, but they were going to be effective in reducing poverty, Frederick was sure. Equally important, they would take the political pressure off his boss. And, Frederick thought, managing the new programme could not be bad for his career. There was another advantage, too: if nothing else, Judith would be cross! In his mind's eye, Frederick could see her now, sitting in her office, devising yet another grandiose plan for food security.

It wasn't the idea of a plan that Frederick objected to so much: he was a planner himself. But when he thought about Judith, he couldn't suppress a feeling of irritation. What he remembered most clearly was the series of meetings he had been asked to attend (summoned more like) at the Ministry. Of course, he had gone, what else was he to do? But why should his Ministry, Commerce, be expected to share its ideas and submit to someone else's master plan? After all, his boss was in

the Cabinet, just as Judith's was – and his Minister was at least as weighty a figure in the hierarchy as hers.

Getting across town for meetings was never easy, with the traffic and the road repairs. It was even harder when the Ministry vehicle was ten years old and stalled at every junction. And then to arrive and see Judith's brand new Peugeot sitting in the Ministry car park! And the air conditioning! And the photocopier! And the three computers, sitting neatly under plastic covers! Frederick grimaced at the thought. Didn't the WFI realise how badly his team at Commerce needed all those things?

The meetings themselves were an ordeal. Judith, of course, was in charge, but she would always have a technical specialist by her side, sometimes local, but more often a young, foreign consultant, new to the country, hopelessly inexperienced and earning far too much. Judith herself came from Health, Frederick knew, so you couldn't expect much: a fixation with nutrition, endless concern with mothers and young children, no idea about production, let alone trade, a romantic idea about mutual support in traditional communities.

Anyway, they'd all be there – half a dozen different Ministries, several autonomous agencies and sometimes some aid people – all waiting for Judith's latest bombshell. And sure enough, she'd call on her technical side-kick and out would come some half-baked proposal that they had dreamed up behind closed doors, but which always meant somebody else taking on the burden of implementation. Not only that, but the proposal would be weighed down with endless committees and task forces, responsible for everything from detailed planning to post-project evaluation: and always with someone from Judith's office in the chair. It was like being in a police state, Frederick had thought, as if no one could be trusted to do anything on their own. Judith would probably call it coordination, he thought; he himself would simply call it bureaucratic.

Well, of course, Frederick was an experienced enough civil servant to deal with meetings like that. He'd always be very polite, the idea was wonderful, definitely worth thinking about. His special congratulations to the WFI for supporting this fascinating work. There were one or two small points that needed further discussion, but Frederick was sure they could be sorted out. What was needed was very careful study by the national, technical specialists (these words said with especial emphasis) and he would guarantee to undertake detailed scrutiny at the Ministry of Commerce. And with a bit of luck, that was that: he would take the proposal back to the office, boot it down to a group of junior people and forget all about it. If Judith rang, well, they were on the job, this was a very delicate area and he would get back to her as soon as he could.

Poor Judith. But she had to learn. Food trade and food pricing were his responsibility. It was no use her pushing for a decision in these meetings. She couldn't be authoritarian with him, or tell him what to do. After all, who had dreamed up the idea of food subsidies? And who had persuaded the Cabinet to accept the idea? Frederick didn't need a Food Security Office, did he?

And with that, Frederick's smile returned and he turned back to his desk. Time to write a memo to the WFI, asking them to support the new food subsidy programme. A Peugeot, perhaps, or would a Land Cruiser be better?