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THE ROLE OF EXTENSION IN AGRICULTURAL COOPERATIVE DEVELOPMENT IN LIMPOPO

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ABSTRACT

Agricultural Extension is rarely understood by many practitioners who belong outside the development ambit, as well as those who are in other professions other than community development. This paper discusses the various facets of extension in an attempt to clarify some of the concepts such as; meaning of extension, extension principles and extension functions. Agricultural development is not a once off activity or giving hand-out, hence the paper brings in a dimension of agricultural extension programme planning process and links it to agricultural cooperatives. Since agricultural cooperatives are not special, and that they are not immune to problems, some of the challenges are identified and discussed with a hope that if these challenges could be avoided, cooperatives could become sustainable. An innovative approach and some criteria for successful cooperatives are proposed together with new strategies to mobilize farmers interested in agricultural cooperatives. The paper concludes with few recommendations such as using the bottom up approach, empowerment of the committees, active participation, and sensitization of the leaders, encouraging ownership and working on needs driven approach.

Keywords: Cooperative development, Extension, Limpopo.

INTRODUCTION

Extension is one of the government policy mechanisms that have an important role to play in developing agriculture, hence many governments in the world have ministry of agriculture with extension and research components (Van den Ban and Hawkins, 1990). Extension has an important role to play in ensuring that agriculture develops and assume its rightful position in the arena of development especially small scale and upcoming commercial farmers. For example Neuchatel (2007: 2), confirmed that a well-designed extension services contribute to improving agricultural production, land use systems, reduce rural poverty and equitable economic development through facilitating access to market for farm supporting the sustainable management of natural resources, enhancing the management of rural communities and other agricultural sectors, Agricultural cooperatives are seen as some of the

enterprises that can be assisted by extension to become sustainable hence the role of extension is investigated in this regard.

STUDY OBJECTIVES

- The purpose of this paper is as follows:
- To outline underlining concept and principles of extension.
- To discuss briefly the functions of Extension in relation to farmers.
- To discuss extension programme process
- To discuss briefly agricultural cooperative development in Limpopo.
- To discuss shortly the challenges of cooperative development in Limpopo.
- To suggest Farmer mobilization strategies and some recommended steps.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The problem observed in cooperative development is that attention is mainly focused on purely managerial factors as the cause of cooperative failures with no regard to capacitate those individuals who manage the cooperatives in terms of honing them with soft skills

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which could enable them to understand managerial assignments. In most cases what is observed is the failure of cooperative managers to bring in the desired outputs in the business, the result is the blame game of the systems of management adopted in those organizations, forgetting that the foundation of any system to be sustainable should be based in human development. Extension system has proven that it can be used as one of the tools to strengthen human capacity for sustainable development (Bembridge, 1991).

METHODOLOGY

Cooperative movements have been praised in many countries as one of the solutions to empower its members to generate more income and in the process has become the major tool to fight poverty and deprivation. Cooperatives are seen as the main driver to job creation. This subject has received prominence in the world that in 2012 the United Nations have declared 2012 the year of International year of cooperative. Due to this underlining reason the writer has adopted a literature review.

FINDINGS

THE CONCEPT OF EXTENSION

Research has found that the meaning of the term "extension" is well known and accepted by people who work in extension organizations and services but not well understood in the wider community. One reason is because there is no single definition of extension applicable to all situations. Extension can be applied in other fields such as: preventive health, family planning, environmental protection, recreation, waste disposal and so on (Roeling, 1988).

Agricultural extension is a system of non-formal education for adults in rural areas which is based on relevant content derived from agricultural, social, and communication research synthesized into a body of concepts, principles and operational procedures.

Many authors agree that Extension is a process of working with rural people in order to improve their living standard (Bembridge, 1991; Garforth and Oakley, 1985, accepted concept of extension because it depends on context and interpretations that is given to it (Garforth and Oakley, 1985, Rivera, 1989; Bembridge, 1991, Van Den Ban and Hawkins, 1990). Furthermore extension is not a single, once off activity, but an intervention (Roeling, 1988). Extension is also seen as an applied science with specific principles to guide the practice. Few principles are discussed next.

PRINCIPLES OF EXTENSION

Extension is practiced throughout the world and it is guided by principles. Many authors (Bembridge, 1991; Garforth and Oakley, 1985, Van den Ban, 1990) have come with new principles however the difference are minimal except that the emphasis tended to focus on how these principles are applied.

Extension works with people not for them: Extension works with rural people. The extension officer does not take decisions for the farmers, but guide them to take decisions to solve their problems. People have more confidence and projects tend to be sustainable because participants own the decision.

Extension is accountable to its clients: Extension services and officers have two sets of masters. This is a difficult to maintain a balance, because on one hand they are accountable to their senior officers and to the government. The extension officers are expected to follow official policies and guidelines in their work. On the other hand, extension is the servant of rural people and it has the responsibility to fulfil the needs of the people in the area where it operates (Garforth and Oakley, 1985).

Extension is a two- way link: Extension is not a one way process in which the extension officer transfers knowledge and ideas to farmers and their families, but it should be a two way flow of ideas, suggestions or even advice. Extension bridges the gap between the farmer and research (Garforth and Oakley, 1985).

Extension cooperates with other rural development organizations: Extension services should work closely with other organizations found in the rural areas that provide essential services to the farmers. Such organizations include political, health services, support organizations, local schools and community development (Garforth and Oakley, 1985).

Extension works with different target groups: Extension recognizes that not all farmers in one area will have the same problems, for example they will have differential access challenges to resources. Different groups cannot be offered a single package of advice suitable to all farmers different groups need to be identified and each be assisted to have programme appropriate to each group.

Extension provide technical knowledge and information: Extension provides technical knowledge and information to assist farmers to improve their farming. The information can be related to crops, animal, economics, and natural resources.

FUNCTIONS OF EXTENSION

Extension performs functions in the areas where it operates. Different authors have documented different kinds of functions (Garfoth and Oakly, 1985, Bembridge, 1991, and Van den Ban and Hawkins, 1990). Extension employs teaching and learning principle which is aimed at effecting behavioural change in the farmers, because some are tradition bound and therefore conservative. Extension is educational and informal in nature. Its classrooms are under the trees and under the trees. The extension tasks involve the following:

- Developing knowledge, skills, favourable attitude in the farmer.
- Dissemination of useful and practical information related to agriculture as well as transferring the farmers' problems back to research institutions.
- Practical application of such knowledge to help farmers analyze their problems and effect improvement through carefully planned and organized programme. The programmes are participatory in nature.
- Helping farmers to gain managerial skills to operate in a commercial economy through training and guidance in problem –solving and decision making.
- Promoting project sustainability and the conservation of natural resources.

EXTENSION PROGRAMME PLANNING PROCESS

Extension must understand and be committed to a tested conceptual framework for extension programming. Researchers have found that for extension to be effective it needs to be guided by a particular planning framework. A number of researchers promoted a particular framework in South Africa known as the "Nine Spokes of the Wheel" (Murton, 1965, Bembridge, 1991, Duvel, 1992, Boone, 1985). The Nine spokes of the wheel had nine steps and it was top down in a sense although efforts were taken to involve participants but did not become sustainable.

Participants in the nine spokes of the wheel did not feel genuinely participating but rather used as collaborators of the programme. The Nine spokes was later adapted and given different names. For example, (Duvel, 2002, called it "purposeful or Programmed Extension, and Boone (1985), called it "Extension Education process Model". This model consists of three steps namely planning, design and implementation, and evaluation. The Limpopo province piloted a participatory extension

approach under the Broadening of Agricultural extension Services and Delivery (BASED) programme. The programme involved a tested approach of programme planning. The experience is in the process of being institutionalized within Limpopo Departmental programmes in future.

AGRICULTURAL COOPERATIVE DEVELOPMENT IN LIMPOPO

A cooperative is a business with some special attributes. For example the governance of structure of cooperative is significantly more open, democratic, transparent and inclusive than that of for-profit business. Cooperatives can be formed for individuals, business or communities and are defined by this three attributes namely owned and democratically controlled by its members, returns surplus revenues to members, and it is motivated by service to their members. There are five types of cooperatives in practice namely consumer, producer, worker, purchasing /shared service, and hybrid. Of particular importance is that cooperatives can be identified in terms of sectors. According to (International year of Cooperative in the USA) 2012, there are 13 sectors of which agricultural cooperative fall within this category.

THE CHALLENGES OF COOPERATIVE DEVELOPMENT IN LIMPOPO

Cooperatives in Limpopo are experiencing difficulties because of not operating in terms of the seven known principles adopted by the International Cooperative Alliance in 199(International year of Cooperative in the USA, 2012). A number of challenges have been documented in Limpopo studies conducted by LEDET (Makhuvha, 2012), and by the University of Venda (Chauke, 2012).

Some of the challenges include top-down approaches in establishment and implementation, undemocratic management, non-existence of the cooperatives, or only "paper cooperative" and not sustainable. If the Department of Agriculture is to make a meaningful contribution through cooperative, there is a need to approach cooperatives differently. For example a new strategy to assist in mobilizing the existing and potential farmers in cooperatives with success criteria.

CRITERIA FOR THE NEW STRATEGY

The new strategy needs support by the government, committed technicians, back up support by subject matter specialists in agricultural cooperatives.

FARMER MOBILIZATION STRATEGIES

There are a number of strategies that can be used to mobilize farmers. Some of the approaches are discussed in the following section.

TRADITIONAL APPROACHES

In this approaches the head men offices or chiefs' offices can be visited to create awareness. Experience in Uganda revealed that two strategies were found useful in mobilizing farmers who had BXW disease in their banana plantation. The disease threatens the food security, It was important that the community participated in the control of the disease. According to Kubiriba *et al.* (2012) the method work in the creation of awareness and the chiefs assisted by enforcing by- laws in the village. The approach culminated in a community action taken to solve the problem.

Farmer Field School: This is one of the strategies which can be applied to mobilize farmers around a particular topic. It consists of a set of principles which are followed by the extension technician and he is backstopped by a knowledgeable subject matter specialist. This approach has been used successfully in Asia in the cultivation of rice. Farmer Field Schools (FFS) is a community based approach. It empowers farmers to make logical crop management decisions, exposes farmers to new ways of thinking and problem solving, and encourages them to implement and discuss solutions on their own (Kubiriba *et al.*, 2012).

FFS also shortens the time between research stations to adoption and facilitates the building of coherent farmer groups that are able to demand for services. The Scientist team is involved in the training of trainers who are usually local extension officers. The trainers are additionally trained in setting-up and running farmer field schools. FFSs normally consist of 30 farmers. When FFSs have been set up, the trainer visits the group of farmers weekly or bi-weekly to train the farmers for up to 25 times following a set curriculum from planting to harvesting in case the problem is crop related (Owen and Simpson, 2004).

The Scientist team backstops this training only once in a while." The platform for sharing the experiences could be disseminated through field days, songs, local mass media and plays. Based on the Uganda case study the approach was successfully applied to control the BXW crop disease in the banana plantation. It is the writers' conviction that the approach can be tried in mobilizing agricultural cooperative participants in Limpopo.

Implementing lessons learnt from Broadening Agricultural Extension & Delivery Services (BASED) project to mobilize farmers:

Based projects have used special methodologies in the form of a basket of tools to mobilize farmers. The methods or tools are participatory in nature. Extension technicians are trained to use these tools. The tools are used to handle specific challenge in the programme cycle. The writers have witnessed the methodologies used by BASED when they were tested during the two pilot districts namely Vhembe and Capricorn in Limpopo Province.

These tools were used to mobilize farmers in different stages of the programme such as in the: conceptual, development, implementation and evaluation stage. For example at the conceptual stage of the project the sensitizing of leadership method is used, in the planning stage a "ranking tool" is used, at the planning stage where vision is needed to unite the participants a "bus code tool" is used, in case problem erupts, the "Knotty Rope" is tool is used, and in the enhancement of ownership empowerment the "River Code" is used, and in the evaluation stages "Mid -Season or End of Season" tools are used. It might not make sense to any reader who did not see these tools in practice, it may sound too abstract. The tools have borne fruits in the pilot sites where they have been tested. In Spitszkop Village (Capricorn) and in Mbahela (Vhembe), the tools have been used to establish seed multiplication projects which are functional since inception.

The tools were also instrumental in establishing value addition projects such as Limpopo Tomato Growers Association (LTGA) and studies in Limpopo such as commercialization of goat farming in Sekhukhune district; and Blouberg Integrated Livestock Enterprise and Commercialization (BILEC) project. In all cited examples farmers were involved in the projects.

How to approach co-operative Mobilization in Limpopo:

Most of the problems in Limpopo have been caused by the top down approach in different stages of the agricultural cooperatives. To avoid such problems in future, it is advisable that there should be no unit or directorate that decide for the farmers. The process of needs driven should be applied. Extension officers may need to be taken on courses of cooperatives as well as on the facilitation process to mobilize the farmers. The criteria outlined in this paper should be considered.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings about agricultural cooperatives

the following recommendations are made:

Any new strategy will need to be informed by some success factors. The following six criteria are based from the experience of the writers. These are:

a) Bottom up approaches in cooperative identification: Top-down approaches in the identification of the projects have left no room for the dependency. The clients of agricultural cooperatives should be involved in all levels of the project identification, implementation and evaluation.

(b) Sensitization of the leaders: One of the challenges experienced is lack of cooperation from those in the government. Leaders should be sensitized about the cooperatives. This method is helpful when creating awareness in the early stages of the project identification.

c) Empowerment or Capacity building: Agricultural cooperatives is a business all the shareholders will need to be capacitated to understand the principles and how to work in line with them.

d) Active participation: Participation by clients is encouraged. Where participants participate it solves many problems. There are different forms of participation such as being asked to collaborate, passive participation, Research has found that these forms of participation are not always accepted (Pretty & Vodouhe, 1997).

e) Needs driven: Imposing the idea does not create ownership in the idea. When a need arise to own the project this is not supported. Therefore it should be need driven however the process of need identification if done properly without promising them any resource as the main goal can work. Only the interested members should be sifted through to become owners of the agricultural cooperatives.

f) Ownership: Project ownership encourages sustainability. All efforts should be engaged to ensure that participants feel that they own the projects. Ownership encourages decision making by participants.

CONCLUSION

Extension enables people to interact with each other and outsiders to gain information, insights, knowledge and skills to improve their capacity to solve problems, improve productivity, and upgrade their quality of life (Swanson, 2011). The paper has attempted to explain the circumstances that extension and agricultural extension finds itself. It was concluded that there is no generally accepted definition of it. It was also indicated that

Extension programs are generally the interface between local people and the government. Most government departments, such as agriculture, health, education and rural development, have organized extension programs to serve their clientele. The findings reveal the importance of agricultural extension both in the world and in Limpopo. It also identified the functions of extension such as to enhance learning in non-formal educational settings by communicating agricultural research findings and recommendations to farmers. The importance of different strategies was reviewed. Of particular interest is the need to identify the criteria for success and they serve as recommendations for considering them when mobilizing farmers for participating in agricultural cooperatives. The lessons derived from BASED in mobilization of farmers are positive highlights to indicate what can be achieved if the extension officers are committed and well supported by those in authority.

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