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Reflections on two terms as editor of *Agrekon*

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1. 1990–1992

Agrekon was finally able to operate independently from 1 April 1990, in other words from Volume 28, when the Department of Agriculture decided to pass it on to AEASA together with a generous dowry that was sufficient to carry the not inconsiderable costs of printing and distribution, etc. for the first few years. The times they were a' changing: 2 February 1990 was a real watershed moment in South Africa, which created the circumstances for many changes that would otherwise not have been countenanced. Furthermore, with the increasing pressure to “publish or perish” came increased emphasis on independent peer review and proof of the absence of conflicts of interest. We were fortunate, because we were able to tackle these new pressures from a solid base, as the Journal was in good “academic” shape (Wissing and Groenewald 1987), all the processes and procedures for getting it out to the members of the Association were in place, and new technologies (think Microsoft Office®) were being produced and were rapidly improving. We would soon be able to produce a whole edition without the intervention of a typewriter, even if we did not have Google Translate® to assist with bilingual publication!

In our editorial note in the first *Agrekon* of the new era (Van Zyl and Vink 1990) we noted the origins of the Journal, with the government Department of Agricultural Economics and Marketing¹ playing a similar important role in the early years to that of the Economic Research Service USDA in the United States (Stanton 2007). We also noted the strengthening bonds between our Association and *Agrekon*, which manifested especially in the publication of the annual AEASA Conference papers in the year-end edition of each volume. We noted that, at that time, *Agrekon* was a good barometer of the state of research and the practice of agricultural economics in South(ern) Africa, but we also announced some important changes to the publication. First, the Journal was expanded to four editions a year, while the final edition would still be dedicated to the Conference proceedings. Second, there would be an expanded list of referees and a new Editorial board to reflect the new emphasis on arms-length, expert review of contributions.

Third, the purpose, target audience and content were reoriented to make them more transparent, and more reflective of the rapidly expanding membership that AEASA experienced at that time. More specifically, learning from Glenn Johnson (1987) we wanted *Agrekon* to cover disciplinary topics in the application of economics to problems in the farm and food sector; multidisciplinary or subject matter topics that synthesise relevant evidence and information about the sector; and problem solving in all aspects of the sector, including farm management, extension, marketing and market development and decision-making in farming, government, private enterprise and research institutions, etc. We noted the difficulty of this last type of publication, usually the purview of professionals rather than academics, but I suppose it is fair to say that neither we or our successors really succeeded in meeting this objective, largely because *Agrekon* became so successful in soliciting contributions of the first two types.

In a similarly expansive mood, we noted the important link between knowledge and economic growth, and ended the editorial thus (Van Zyl and Vink 1990, 2): “*By stimulating communication*

on research in agricultural economics and making the results available, Agrekon promises to be a source of economic growth and well-being in its own right." Brave words, indeed, from the arrogance of youth! Yet the Journal did change immediately, at least in quantity if not in quality: the average number of pages per volume in 1987/89 was 153, while the 1990 volume jumped to 430 pages, followed by a more staid but still increased 318 pages in 1992. This increase was evident even when the conference papers are excluded: the average for "ordinary" articles was 73 in 1987/89, and 198 and 154 in 1990 and 1991, respectively.

2. 2002–2010

There were a number of highlights of this term (sometimes, when working with difficult authors the sentiment of "sentence" comes to mind!) In the first year, for example, Volume 41 No 3 was somewhat controversial, as I placed only three articles in that edition. The purpose was to emphasise two things. First, that the Journal would appear on or before the month on its front cover. Readers who have grown up with online publishing will not appreciate how important this was in the days of hard copy, not least because it was one of the criteria for listing in all of the main bibliographic series. Second, to signal that the Journal would not compromise on the quality of articles.

This was but one step in getting the message out that AEASA was serious about presenting its members and its readership at large with a well-managed journal that maintained a track record in the publication of high-quality scholarship. It seemed to be successful, because in the ensuing decade Agrekon achieved three important milestones: in chronological order we were listed on the sought-after Thomson-Reuters (now Clarivate) bibliographic database, we migrated to a professional publishing house, and our Impact factor increased considerably.

The first propitious date was July 28, 2008, when we received a letter from Thomson Reuters informing us that Agrekon had been selected for inclusion in the Science Citation Index Expanded and the Journal Citation Reports/Science Edition, starting with Vol 47(1), i.e., from the beginning of 2008, a position it still holds.

Second, in planning the migration of Agrekon Journal from being published by AEASA to become part of the Taylor & Francis stable, the Management Committee set three criteria for the selection of a new partner, namely:

- Our new publisher had to have a global reach, but a local touch
- The editors had to provide the assurance that the publisher understood the arcane world of academic publishing, and understood the needs of the Association as well as those of the Journal
- The publisher had to have a track record in improving the impact of academic Journals in our and related fields.

We found these qualities in the Taylor & Francis Group, working in conjunction with UNISA Press, and it is fair to say, a decade later, that it has by and large been a very successful marriage.

Third, while we all recognise that bibliometrics such as the citation counts and Journal Impact Factors have their problems, there's no getting away from the fact that the best authors look for the Journals with the highest scores, thereby perpetuating the divide between the best and the rest. In this regard, Agrekon's impact factor increased from 0.125 in 2002 to 0.296 in 2005, and to 0.7 in 2011. It was only in 2019 that the Journal gained a higher IF (it is now an impressive 1.19). Also, the Harzing's Publish or Perish database shows that fully nine of the ten articles with the highest number of citations since 1971 come from the 2002 to 2010 period. Also, Agrekon has had 13 articles which have attracted more than 10 citations per year on average since their publication: nine of these were published between the years 2002 and 2010.

During my tenure as Editor, I took responsibility for nine volumes with 36 editions, and a total of 232 articles accepted. Unfortunately, I did not keep a record of how many papers were submitted during that time, but it is interesting to see how the focus of published articles has broadened

over time as Agrekon's editorial policy unfolds to place greater emphasis on the agricultural development problems of the African continent. Taking the first three editions of 2020 as a benchmark, where a third of the articles analyse aspects of South African agriculture, arguably a good reflection of how interest in the Journal has expanded over time. In the period 2002–2010, by contrast, we started with 90% of articles focussed on South Africa, a number that remained in the 75–85% range through to 2010. Similarly, the number of first (lead) authors who were resident in South Africa at the time of publication remained above 80% throughout the 2002–2010 period (with a slight decline in 2003) compared to the 36% in 2020.

The high point in my term of office was the publication of the special edition on Food Security in the final edition of 2009, with Miriam Altman, Tim Hart and Peter Jacobs from the HSRC as Guest Editors. In their Introduction, they explain that the edition contained articles from an HSRC project to monitor household food security in South Africa with a view to stimulating debate on the issues at hand. The articles in this edition have the distinction of constituting almost 30% of Agrekon's "most read online" articles, with three of these articles included in the top 10 most cited articles in Agrekon.

Note

1. As is the case with most Departments of State, this function has had many names over the years. Here we use the name at the time of the transfer to AEASA.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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