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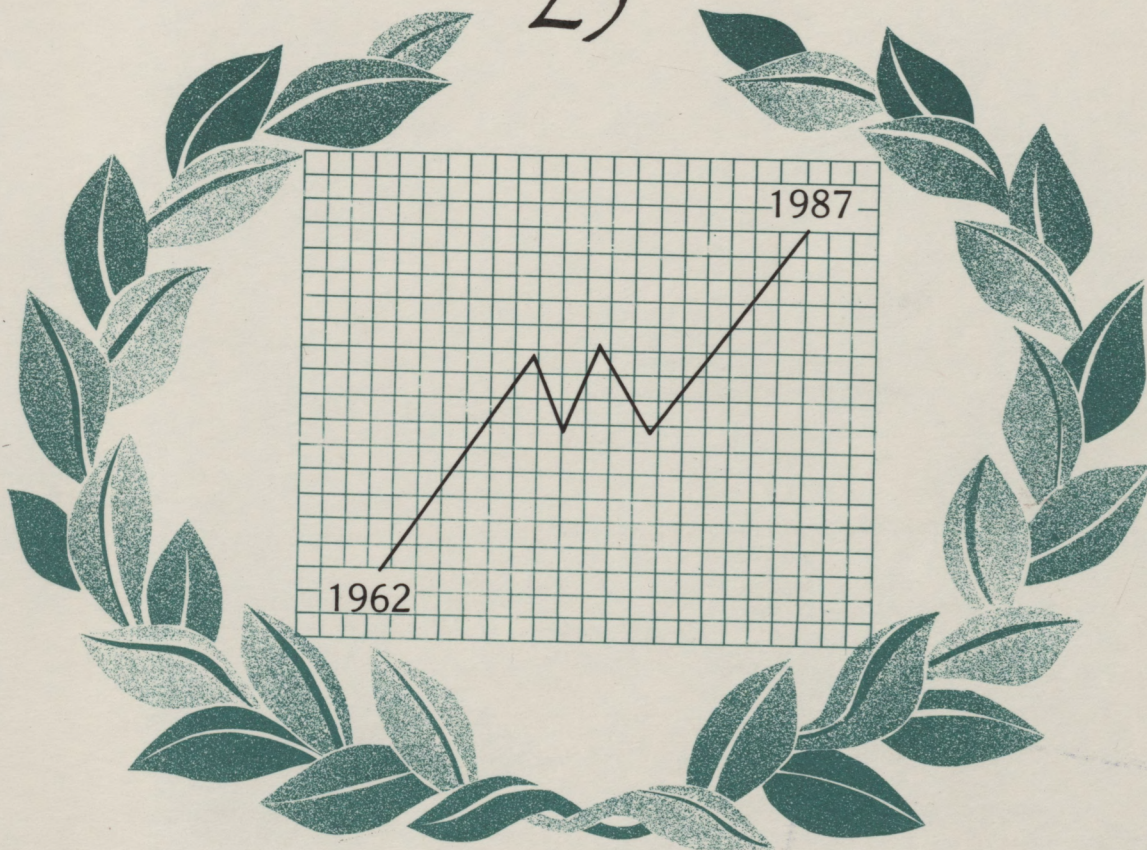
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FOUR-MONTHLY JOURNAL
ON AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS

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Agrekon

Vol. 26 No. 2
JUNE 1987

Price R2,00
(plus GST)

AGREKON: THE FIRST QUARTER-CENTURY

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INTRODUCTION

The journal *Agrekon*, of which the first issue bears the date January 1962, is now 25 years old. Much has happened over this quarter-century. We live in a world of change. Political, economic and agricultural conditions have materially changed world-wide and locally. The last quarter-century was the one in which high technology reared its head while some regions were left behind technologically.

By the nature of things, the journal also had to undergo considerable change. It is perhaps opportune on the 25th anniversary of the periodical, to sketch briefly its history and development.

AGREKON'S PURPOSE AND ORIGIN

Agricultural economic research and agricultural economic services in South Africa must largely be traced to the foundation in 1925 of the Division of Economics and Markets of the Department of Agriculture. This Division, later renamed the Division of Agricultural Economic Research, and subsequently subdivided into the present Directorates of Agricultural Production Economics and Agricultural Economic Trends, was for long the most important source of economic research and information concerning South African agriculture. It also served as practice-school where many young graduates gained their first research experience.

As time went on, a growing awareness of the need for a regular medium to publish information and research reports concerning agricultural economic matters became evident. On the one hand, not all the reportable research and information was of sufficient volume to warrant publication in the form of separate research bulletins. Nor was there a journal regarded as suitable for this purpose, particularly after the popularisation of *Farming in South Africa*, which had initially been the Department's journal, especially as the then newly established *South African Journal of Agricultural Science* did not hold much attraction for agricultural economists.

During the nineteen fifties it was particularly Mr S.J.J. de Swardt, previously Chief of the Division of Economics and Markets and later Secretary of Agricultural Economics and Marketing, who contrived the establishment of such a journal. The result was the first number of *Agrekon* in 1962. As is still the case, *Agrekon* was published by the Department of Agricultural Economics and Marketing.

The name *Agrekon* was Mr S.J.J. de Swardt's personal brainchild, and it satisfied three considerations namely it is brief, it describes the content and it is bilingual. The choice was immediately popular.

It was also fitting that Mr De Swardt wrote the first editorial and also the very first common article (De Swardt, 1962b) - an article which would often be cited in later years. In the editorial, De Swardt expressed himself as follows:

"The purpose of *Agrekon* is not only to furnish a quarterly review, in popular form, containing facts and occurrences which are required by leaders in agriculture, so that they can be given a global picture of changes and developments on the agricultural economic front, but also to provide concise topical contributions by experts closely associated with the study and analysis of these problems. In *Agrekon* these persons will find a channel through which they can communicate the fruits of their labour and share them with colleagues throughout the country and also with all those who are interested in these problems. At the same time it will offer them an opportunity to air their views concerning any particular problem.

"These articles will appear under the names of the authors concerned, together with their designations and occupations, on the definite understanding that their views need not necessarily be those of the Department, organization or institution with which they are associated. It is trusted that this procedure will serve as an inspiration towards serious study of the economic problems with which the agriculturalist and policy makers have to contend.

"In its editorial columns the Department will state its own views, or otherwise in special articles under the signature of the head of the Department, or, by way of a footnote under the contributions where comment is considered necessary.

"Although *Agrekon* is a departmental journal, it should be emphasized that articles by officers of the Control Boards and co-operative societies, or by lecturers at universities and agricultural colleges, or by any other contributor will be welcomed." (De Swardt, 1962a).

Similar sentiments were uttered in a message from Mr D.C.H. Uys, then Minister of Agricultural Economics and Marketing (Uys, 1962):

"I trust that the control boards will permit their officers to make their contributions to *Agrekon* in those instances where it may be of general interest to do so. Furthermore, I hope that anyone who can make a contribution, whether attached to my Department, or to a control board or any other institution, will be rewarded by the fact that their

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Article received: June 1987

work will find a place in an authoritative journal which is produced for the information of their colleagues and policy makers throughout the country. The writers of such articles will be allowed, where possible, to draw their own personal conclusions, without necessarily expressing the views of the Department, board or institution. Without such freedom, a contribution may become so out-dated and distorted in the process of official approval that the final result will not be of much value to the reader."

From the above, it is clear that the goal was twofold. The first goal was to provide to interested parties information concerning the policy and actions of the Department, control boards and other official institutions. The other goal was to provide a medium through which researchers and thinkers could publish their findings and thoughts irrespective of whether the conclusions would be in agreement with those of any authorities.

In the earlier years of the journal, articles aimed at the first goal - the information task - perhaps enjoyed most prominence, as appears, *inter alia*, from articles in which the workings of the Agricultural Union (Van Heerden, 1963) and government institutions were described (Du Plessis, 1962; Dippenaar, 1963; Grobbelaar, 1968), in which price decisions concerning certain products were explained (National Marketing Council, 1964a, 1964b, 1965a, 1965b) or in which the mechanisms of government action were elucidated (Van Rensburg, 1962; Anonymous, 1963; Department of Agricultural Credit and Land Tenure, 1967). These types of contributions gradually diminished after a fairly heavy accent in the earlier years. The last similar contribution occurred when the total issue of *Agrekon*, Vol. 15 No. 2 of April 1976 was devoted to a summary of the Report of the Commission of Enquiry into the Marketing Act.

In accordance with the information goal, editorial articles introduced each issue up to the July 1973 issue (Vol. 12 No. 3). From the first issue in 1962, up to the April 1974 issue (Vol. 13 No. 2) *Agrekon* regularly included short contributions (ordinarily two to three pages) on "Economic tendencies in the South African agriculture", occasionally substituted by a more comprehensive "Trends in the agricultural sector". After April 1974, the latter has been published as an independent periodical.

DEVELOPMENT OF AGREKON OVER 25 YEARS

As has been mentioned, the journal originally regarded it as part of its mission to disseminate information, and the reporting of independent research probably took second place in terms of priority. As will be argued later, the latter gradually began to carry more weight and after 25 years, *Agrekon* has become almost completely a research journal. Incentive for quality undoubtedly played a role in this respect. An important step in this regard

was the grant of a capital sum by Mr S.J.J. de Swardt, the proceeds of which have since 1972 been used to make an award to an author for an article which, in the judgement of a selection panel specially appointed for this purpose, was the most meritorious article to appear in *Agrekon* in a particular year.

The S.J.J. DE SWARDT AGREKON PRIZE thus came into existence. The donor laid down four important considerations for attention by the selection panel:

- (i) "The article must be regarded as a contribution to the knowledge of an agricultural economic subject which promises to be of practical value for a considerable number of primary producers in South Africa."
- (ii) "It must be based upon investigation for which the author was completely or mainly responsible."
- (iii) "Details of the investigation may have appeared in a thesis or a report to an official institution, but the findings in the article may not already have appeared in another journal."
- (iv) "The relevant facts and findings in the article must be presented in such a manner that it will be clear and valuable to policy makers and/or extensionists to agricultural producers."

The S.J.J. de Swardt Agrekon Prize thus emphasizes both quality and usefulness of knowledge.

In 1984 the Editorial Committee of *Agrekon*, in consultation with Mr De Swardt also established a S.J.J. de Swardt debutante prize with the aim of encouraging in particular younger and less experienced agricultural economists to write for the journal.

Agrekon has had a small number of editors since its foundation:

Vol. 1 No. 1 (January 1962) to Vol. 4 No. 3 (July 1965) - Messrs H.J. van Rensburg and O.E. Burger.

Vol. 4 No. 4 (October 1965) to Vol. 9 No. 1 (January 1970) - Dr A.J. Beyleveld.

Vol. 9 No. 2 (April 1970) to Vol. 25 No. 3 (October 1986) - Mr G.J. Wissing.

Since Vol. 26 (1987) - Miss A.M. Visagie.

Agrekon's influence and reputation as a scientific journal gradually increased and expanded. The distribution is world-wide, particularly to libraries. Abstracts of articles appear regularly in *World Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology Abstracts*.

In the first editorial, De Swardt (1962a) also mentions the foundation, a few months earlier, of the Agricultural Economics Association of South Africa. Ties between this society and the journal gradually strengthened in the course of time. Papers presented at conferences of the Association have been published in *Agrekon* since 1969, provided that the papers had been subjected to the normal article evaluation process.

This chronicle would not be complete without mention of an inexplicable decline in interest in the journal in the late seventies and early eighties. The number of articles presented declined in this period

and it began to appear as if, in this sense, both the agricultural economics profession and the journal had entered a period of stagnation. It was eventually decided to reduce the number of issues per year from four to three, and eventually to two. The decline was most serious in 1982 and 1983. The Editorial Committee stood fast throughout this period and refused to compromise on the quality of articles.

A gradual recovery started in 1984, both in respect of quantity and quality of articles submitted. The process received an impetus when the Department of National Education decided in 1985 to recognize *Agrekon* as a scientific journal for university subsidization purposes. This was followed by a policy decision on the part of the Editorial Committee to make selection even more stringent in the future.

At the end of 25 years *Agrekon* has entered a new, refreshing growth period.

THE TRANSITION FROM A POPULAR SCIENTIFIC TO A SCIENTIFIC DIRECTED JOURNAL

The transition referred to above, namely from a journal devoted mainly or largely to information, to a journal which would be used to a much larger extent as research medium, naturally affected the style in which articles were written as well as the content of articles. In this sense, *Agrekon's* very substance underwent change - it developed from a popular scientific to a scientific journal or, otherwise stated, from largely an information journal to one predominantly aimed at the scientist. It became increasingly analytical. It also increasingly started to follow developments in the use of empirical techniques, statistical models, operational research, etc.

Publication of articles which were more empirically analytical in nature, involving the use of statistical techniques which could be tested for significance, gradually increased after a sporadic start. The first article employing simple regression in which coefficients were subjected to statistical testing, only appeared in the third year of publication (Groenewald, 1964). In the ensuing years, similar techniques were still used only sporadically. The first application of multiple regression techniques appeared approximately two years later (Nieuwoudt and Döckel, 1966). This also contained the first empirical production function to be published in *Agrekon*. The first econometric demand study appeared three years later (Vosloo and Groenewald, 1969) and after yet two more years the first article involving operational research applications (Von Maltitz, 1971). Now, after 25 years, use of these and other more complex techniques have become common in *Agrekon* and no longer arouse particular attention.

A similar trend developed in regard to the express use of and reference to the theoretical foundations of Agricultural Economics and its mother sciences - once more a manifestation of a

transition from popular scientific orientation to scientific discipline. The express use of theoretical foundations as a base for calculations and/or argumentation found its first clear manifestation in the third volume (Van Wyk, 1964) and the next only one year afterwards (Van Schoor, 1965). Now, more than twenty years later, it is no rare occurrence to encounter these theoretical discussions - sometimes integrated with philosophical reasoning and/or empirical analysis - in *Agrekon*.

An increased orientation to research and use by the scientist would naturally also influence the journal stylistically. One important aspect is the degree to which literary references are used to support arguments, for purposes of comparison and for suitable documentation. An analysis of this aspect appears in Table 1. For purposes of the Table, the first 25 volumes were subdivided into three groups: Volumes 1-8, Volumes 9-17 and Volumes 18-25

TABLE 1 - Percentage distribution of articles according to number of literature references, *Agrekon*, 1962 to 1986

Volumes	Percentage articles with number of reference				
	0	1-4	5-9	10-14	over 14
1-8	59,3	22,0	11,4	3,2	4,1
9-17	19,4	20,1	23,0	11,5	26,0
18-25	17,3	6,4	25,4	14,5	36,4

The following are clearly evident from Table 1:

- (i) A rapid decline in articles without any references between the first and second periods, followed by yet another decline.
- (ii) A decline in articles containing four or fewer references, particularly from the second to the third period.
- (iii) Considerable increases in articles using five or more literary references.

The direction of *Agrekon* has, in the opinion of the authors, gradually changed from the popular scientific to the scientific. The question arises as to whether or not a vacuum came into being. Is there possibly scope today for a popular scientific journal on agricultural economic affairs? There may be justification for the establishment of such an information source.

SUBJECT AREAS

In order to gain an impression of the subject areas covered in articles as published in *Agrekon*, the articles were arbitrarily divided into seven categories:

- (i) Demand, supply, price, income and trade analysis and policy.
- (ii) Resource economics, resource policy and regional development.
- (iii) Development - agricultural and general.
- (iv) Micro production economics and rural sociology.
- (v) Farm management - i.e. aspects related to decision-making and risk.
- (vi) Marketing.
- (vii) Other.

TABLE 2 - Percentage distribution of articles according to quantities in various subject areas, *Agrekon*, 1962 to 1986

Subject area	Volume 1-8	Volume 9-17	Volume 18-25
Demand, supply, price, income and trade analysis and policy	25,8	14,1	36,8
Resource economics, resource policy, regional development	10,5	14,8	7,3
Development	6,5	14,1	11,0
Micro production economics and rural sociology	21,8	18,4	13,8
Farm management	5,6	19,0	17,4
Marketing	22,6	9,8	12,8
Other	7,2	9,8	0,9

This subdivision, classified into the same three periods as for Table 1, appears in Table 2.

The most salient fact in Table 2 is the low degree of attention given to marketing since Vol. 9 (1970). This situation can in no way be accepted as satisfactory and all institutions involved with agricultural economic research and agricultural economic services should take note of this weakness.

A second important characteristic is the increase (since the first period) in the relative attention devoted to farm management, largely at the cost of micro production economics. This is probably a reaction to the growing awareness that the static principles of neo-classical production economics are inadequate in accommodating all farm managerial problems, particularly those associated with decision-making.

The first subject area (demand, supply, price, income and trade analysis and policy) was the one receiving most attention in two of the three periods.

INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION OF AUTHORS

The relative institutional origin of articles in *Agrekon* was the subject of the last analysis. Table 3 provides information over the same three periods.

It is firstly evident that the percentage share of the State declined sharply from 56,9 per cent in the first period to 9,0 per cent over the last eight volumes of the journal. The share of Departments of Agriculture shrank from 52,0 per cent to 8,1 per cent. The Department of Agricultural Economics and Marketing (excepting the Directorate of Agricultural Economic Trends and the National Marketing Council) was the largest institutional contributor over the first eight volumes, but its contributions completely disappeared over the last eight. Of all the government institutions, only the Directorate (formerly Division) of Agricultural Production Economics still made a substantial contribution over the third period, but also this contribution was percentage-wise and absolutely much smaller over the last eight years than previously.

Contributions from statutory bodies, particularly control boards, declined considerably, whilst contributions from private organizations increased sufficiently to outnumber those both from the state and the statutory sector over the last eight years. Between the first two periods foreign

TABLE 3 - Percentage distribution of articles according to institutional affiliation of authors, *Agrekon*, 1962 to 1986¹

Institutional affiliation	Volume 1-8	Volume 9-17	Volume 18-25
<i>Government departments</i> ² : Total	56,9	22,2	9,0
Other departments	4,9	3,2	0,9
<i>Agricultural departments</i> ³ : Total	52,0	19,0	8,1
Directorate of Agricultural Production Economics	15,4	12,0	5,6
Directorate of Agricultural Economic Trends	8,1	2,1	0,9
National Marketing Council	5,7	0,7	0,9
Other: Department of Agricultural Economics and Marketing	22,0	1,4	0
Other: Agricultural Technical Services ⁴	0,8	2,8	0,7
<i>Universities</i> : Total	19,5	56,9	65,5
Pretoria	3,6	20,4	18,0
Natal	7,0	11,8	25,5
Stellenbosch	4,1	5,7	2,3
Orange Free State	2,4	6,7	9,0
South Africa	2,4	2,8	6,0
Other	0	9,5	4,7
<i>Statutory organisations</i> : Total	17,9	5,3	8,8
Control boards	16,3	2,5	2,3
Development Bank	0	0	3,7
Other	1,6	2,8	2,8
Private sector	4,1	7,8	11,1
Foreign contributions	1,6	7,8	5,6

¹Where authors of an article mentioned different institutional affiliations, a decimal was allotted to each

²Excluding statutory organisations and universities

³Allocation between the Directorate of Agricultural Production Economics and the Directorate of Agricultural Economic Trends prior to the splitting of the then Division of Agricultural Economic Research done according to subject area

⁴At present Department of Agriculture and Water Supply

contributions increased considerably. A substantial part of these contributions came from Rhodesia. The contributions came to an end when the present Zimbabwean regime assumed power.

Contributions from universities increased percentage-wise and absolutely over time. In Volumes 1 to 8 (1962 to 1969) these contributions were just short of 20 per cent, to increase to almost two-thirds in Volumes 18 to 25 (1979 to 1986). The University of Pretoria and the University of Natal have together consistently yielded over a half of the contributions of university origin, and this percentage share has increased. As percentage of contributions from universities, the combined contributions from these two universities were as follows: Volumes 1-8: 54,2 per cent; Volumes 9-17: 56,4 per cent; Volumes 18-25: 66,5 per cent.

The declining share of the state and statutory organisations as source of articles for *Agrekon* can obviously at least partially be ascribed to the changed orientation of the journal from a scientific popular direction to a purer scientific one. Nevertheless, this is a source of concern seen in the light of the broad activities of the Departments of Agriculture in particular, and the existence of research units within these departments.

It must be mentioned in this regard that the Directorate of Agricultural Economic Trends which

is regarded as a research unit, has over the last eight years (Volumes 18 to 25) been the origin of only one published article. This must obviously have contributed to the dwindling of the attention given to marketing, relative to other subject areas (Table 2). The decline in the share and contributions also of the Directorate of Agricultural Production Economics, although by no means as drastic as the rest of the State sector, is food for thought.

CONCLUSION

Agrekon can largely be regarded as a barometer of the state of research and practice of agricultural economics in South Africa. The journal has developed into by far the most important publication medium for South African agricultural economists.

It is evident that *Agrekon* in particular, and the profession in general, has shown considerable progress over the first quarter century of *Agrekon's* existence. Some unsatisfactory situations have been and still are evident. Danger signs also exist.

As in all other facets of life, experience gained in the past will have to be utilised and exploited for guidance.

The journal will, as long as it exists, serve as monument to the one person who, more than anybody else, was the driving force in its creation - Mr S.J.J. de Swardt.

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