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EDITORIAL: THE BEGINNING OF A NEW ERA

Agricultural economics research in South Africa can largely be traced to the establishment in 1925 of the Division of Economics and Markets of the Department of Agriculture. This Division, later renamed the Division of Agricultural Economic Research, was for long the most important source of economic research and information concerning South African agriculture. 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. During the nineteen fifties the efforts of Mr S.J.J. de Swart, previously Chief of the Division of Economics and Markets, and later Secretary of the Department of Agricultural Economics and Marketing, paved the way for the establishment of such a journal. The result was the first issue of *Agrekon* in 1962.

The name *Agrekon* was Mr SJJ de Swart's personal brainchild, and it satisfies three considerations, namely it is brief, it describes the content of the Journal and it is bilingual. The choice was immediately popular. As was the case until the end of 1989, *Agrekon* was published by the Department of Agricultural Economics and Marketing. *Agrekon*'s influence and reputation as a scientific journal gradually increased and expanded. The distribution is world-wide, particularly to libraries. Abstracts of articles appears regularly in the *World Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology Abstracts*.

In the first editorial, mention was made of the foundation, in 1961, of the Agricultural Economics Association of South Africa (AEASA). Ties between this association and *Agrekon* became stronger over time. Papers presented at conferences of AEASA have been published in *Agrekon* since 1969, with the proviso that these contributions have been subject to the normal evaluation process of *Agrekon*. Without an official publication of AEASA, *Agrekon* developed into by far the most important publication medium for South African agricultural economists. At present, *Agrekon* can largely be regarded as a major barometer of the state of research and practice of agricultural economics in Southern Africa.

The Agricultural Economics Association of Southern Africa has periodically looked into the possibilities of an own publication. Mainly due to the existence of *Agrekon*, this was not financially feasible over the longer term. There was also a strong feeling among members that *Agrekon* was fulfilling an important function. In recent years there has however been a renewed interest in an own publication of AEASA. The need for this increased as the Department of Agricultural Economics and Marketing's role in the general practice of agricultural economics in Southern Africa decreased. When the Department announced in 1989 that they were considering the privatization of *Agrekon*, the Agricultural Economics Association of Southern Africa jumped at the opportunity. Here was a journal, already established as an important medium and barometer of the state of research and practice of agricultural economics in Southern Africa, with an international distribution and citation in a major abstract-series, that could be taken over with minimal teething and financial problems. By mutual agreement, Volume 28 of *Agrekon* was the last published by the Department of Agricultural Economics and Marketing. Starting from 1990 (Volume 29), *Agrekon* is officially published by the Agricultural Economics Association of Southern Africa. This issue thus represents the beginning of a new era for *Agrekon*.

This change in publisher will see some changes in the format and policy of *Agrekon*. The "new" *Agrekon* will be a quarterly journal instead of only four-monthly, appearing in March, June, September and December. The last number of each volume will concentrate on the proceedings of the annual meetings of AEASA, while the other numbers will contain original contributions that are normally found in journals such as *Agrekon*.

Other changes will however take time to filter through. The majority of contributions to be published in Volume 29 (Numbers 1-3) were submitted and refereed under the "old" system. It is hoped that as time goes on, *Agrekon* will become an even more balanced journal, representing all of the diversity of interests accommodated by the subject of agricultural economics. The new editors have also decided to reconstitute the panel of referees of *Agrekon*, and this will be decided upon during the course of the year.

In taking over *Agrekon* when professionals' desks are already piled high with both specialist and generalist literature, basic concepts of purpose, audience and content must be clearly in evidence. In general, *Agrekon* is from now on designed to serve the breadth of needs faced by the members of the Agricultural Economics Association of Southern Africa.

The Agricultural Economics Association of Southern Africa has over 500 members. AEASA members work at universities, in research institutions, governments, international organizations and private and public enterprises. A large share of the membership is in professional management positions, with limited capacity and time for scholarly research within the narrowly defined limits usually set for university professionals. Yet it is this full range of professional interest and need that *Agrekon* is attempting to meet.

In attempting to serve this audience, *Agrekon* has identified a broader range of interest than the science of agricultural economics generally represents. The policy statement of *Agrekon* indicates three general areas for coverage in *Agrekon* to define this scope of interest. First, *Agrekon* will cover disciplinary topics in economics applied to problems in the agricultural and food sector. Second, *Agrekon* will cover multi-disciplinary or subject matter topics that bring together relevant evidence and information about the food and agricultural sector. Third, *Agrekon* will publish articles dealing with 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. This last area of problem solving is a particular difficult one from which to obtain well-documented research and endeavour since many professionals involved in this work, even though they may have considerable training in agricultural economics, have little encouragement to publish. Often the results of their work are seen by few, are of a confidential nature or are thought by some to be less than "scientific", but in most cases they have brought to bear the full range of skills they possess from several disciplines on problems with which their colleagues in other parts of Southern Africa are also struggling. This aspect of the work of agricultural economists is just as important as the other areas covered by *Agrekon*.

In promoting communication among agricultural economists, *Agrekon* will also have a "News" section reporting on regional or national meetings, major research underway and questions that members may wish to address to their colleagues. *Agrekon* will also publish selected book reviews of interest to the profession.

Agrekon is actively seeking articles on all these areas to provide the readership, and especially the members of AEASA, with a balance across all regions of Southern Africa and across the three general areas of interest. The editors have the task of assuring the balance in *Agrekon* and enhancing communication among agricultural economists.

The diversity of concerns and professional interests of AEASA members, as well as the differences in methodology, style and approach to research represent a major challenge for *Agrekon*.

to record and report. AEASA, meeting once a year, has been able to attract a large and growing number of agricultural economists concerned with sharing and learning from this diversified experience. Agrekon is intended as another pillar to support this shared communication on a more continuous basis than the annual meetings can achieve.

A large number of people have laboured to bring forward this first issue of Agrekon as official journal of AEASA. With the triumph of a "first" issue, the really difficult work begins,

namely to meet and exceed the vision and expectation that Agrekon holds for all of us. Knowledge is a powerful source of economic growth and well-being. 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. It is hoped that good use will be made of Agrekon by all interested in agricultural economics in Southern Africa and beyond.

JOHAN VAN ZYL AND NICK VINK
EDITORS