EMPOWERING SMALL FARMERS THROUGH COLLECTIVE ACTION : THE CASE OF TECHNOLOGY DEVELOPMENT AND TRANSFER

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Collective action could be the logical route to empowerment for farmers. By working together farmers can, in principle: identify members' needs and consolidate demand; aggregate members' economic power, and address market failures. These capacities would seem to make farmers' organisations the ideal partners in the area of agricultural technology transformation, which can be described as technology development and transfer. This is proven by the strength of "Organised Agriculture in South Africas commercial farming". This paper draws on research focused on emerging black farmers' organisations in South Africa and their involvement in agricultural technology. This research makes it clear that the key to effective change in the technology development supply system in South Africa, and thus to much needed productivity increases amongst black small farmers, is held by the technology system itself. In the absence of significant support, small farmers' organisations (as currently constituted) can be expected to play a restricted role - if any at all - for they are not yet sufficiently united, powerful or technologically-aware to force the opening of doors on their own initiative. One of the major lessons which must be drawn from this is that broader support to farmers' organisations to build capacity and particularly to develop internal communication mechanisms is likely to have to precede support for particular technology initiatives.

1. INTRODUCTION

Collective action is, in many respects, the logical route to empowerment for farmers. By working together farmers can, in principle: identify members' needs and consolidate demand; aggregate members' economic power[1] and address market failures[2] (Hagedorn, 1992; Becker, 1983). These capacities would seem to make farmers' organisations the ideal partners in the area of agricultural technology transformation, which can be described as technology development and transfer.

Indeed much hope has been pinned on formal farmers' organisations as providing a mechanism through which farmers' viewpoints and knowledge might be systematically incorporated into technology priority-setting procedures. The belief is that working with *ad hoc* research groups can provide valuable short-term results while working with formally established farmers' organisations, such as the National African Farmers' Union (NAFU), should contribute to the long term process of empowerment of small farmers and, thereby, the eventual effectiveness of the entire agricultural technology system. Indeed, in South African commercial agriculture the South African Agricultural Union (SAAU) and its provincial affiliates have shown their ability to do just this. They have played an important collective action role in various fields i.e. co-operatives, marketing, legislation, etc. (Brand, Christodoulou, Van Rooyen and Vink, 1992; Vink and Kassier, 1991) and the SAAU is also represented on the Agricultural Research Council (ARC).

From the perspective of the researcher, an added advantage is that working with farmers' organisations might provide a cost effective way of conducting on-farm research which, otherwise, can be prohibitively expensive. If farmers' organisations can 'scale up' the impact of research (in terms of skills gained and results disseminated) as well as members' input into the research process (ensuring 'representativeness' of the research sample) then working with them might reduce the necessary scale of on-farm research without sacrificing any of its benefits.

This paper draws on research conducted by the UK Overseas Development Institute (ODI) in conjunction with various South Africa organisations (including the ARC, the University of Pretoria, the Land and Agricultural Policy Centre (LAPC), the South African Cane Growers Association, the Rural Foundation and the Northern Province Department of Agriculture) during late 1995 to early 1996. The research focused on emerging black farmers' organisations in South Africa. It was undertaken as part of a larger study on farmers' organisations in various developing countries and their involvement in agricultural technology which has examined the truth of and assumptions behind these hypotheses. The research was funded by the UK's Overseas Development Administration.

2. RESEARCH FINDINGS

Overall the ODI study has found that the ability - and the willingness - of large membership organisations to play the role of a pressure group and thereby to ensure that agricultural technology development systems meet their members' needs has probably been overstated (Carney 1996). Broadly speaking, technology involvement generates long-term benefits, is relatively complex, expensive to manage and may be risky (Merrill Sands et. al. forthcoming). If organisations are concerned to generate members' loyalty or to attract new members, which is particularly important early in their lifecycles, investment in technology-related activities may not be the best path to follow, as results are usually not sufficiently concrete, distinct nor immediate. By contrast, any gains in areas such as land reform or increasing members' access to credit and inputs are immediately obvious and of critical importance to members. Not surprisingly the first of NAFU's thirteen objectives, as laid down in its constitution, is 'to promote the acquisition by its members of agricultural land' (NAFU, n.d.).

Furthermore farmers' organisations like NAFU, which aim to play a 'pressure group' type role in South African agricultural policy making may not be the best operational partners for technology development and transfer activities

not least because evidence that they can scale-up technology initiatives and help reduce the effective cost of on-farm research is lacking. While there appears to be much potential for farmers' organisations to promote farmer exchanges and farmer-to-farmer extension, few have succeeded in doing so across a broad front, although there examples of success in this area by the Zimbabwe Farmers' Union and the SAAU (Vink & Kassier, 1991; Hagedorn, 1992; Hagedorn, Vink and Van Zyl, 1991).

Another dimension which needs to be investigated relates to collective action in the delivery system. A strategy which could be explored by emerging small farmers' associations in the South African context is a link-up with the functioning commercial co-operative movement. Such a link-up should assist these small farmers by providing them with improved access to available technologies and the required services to implement these technologies (Van Rooyen, 1996). Indeed, this is already happening in the Pokwane area of the Northern Province where the local emerging small farmer co-operative successfully linked up with the commercial Oos Transvaal Landbou Koöperasie (OTK) for the provision of seed, fertiliser, pesticides and mechanical parts to members (Singini and Van Rooyen, 1995). Such link-ups will, however, only be successful under the assumption that appropriate technology is available or that most technology is scale neutral which is certainly not always the case.

Through these type of co-operative delivery linkages small farmers could also gain access to information, storage, financial support, etc. One particular production model which accommodate such arrangements is found in the type of outgrower schemes which exist in the sugar and sub-tropical fruit industries (Van Rooyen and Botha, 1994).

For a sustainable technology support system to develop, a two way technology strategy is required. First, appropriate technology must be generated and second, such technology must be successfully delivered and maintained. The study shows that in order to succeed in both areas, farmers' organisations must have:

(i) *An ability to identify and prioritise members' problems:* It is assumed that farmers' organisations can perform this difficult task, that they have 'insider' knowledge of members' needs. However, experience shows that this is by no means automatic. First, if members have very diverse needs, it is extremely difficult for leaders to understand what these are unless they put in place formal procedures for systematic information gathering. This is especially so when organisations are large and represent widely dispersed farmers operating mixed subsistence/commercial farming systems, as is the case with NAFU. Second, merely identifying a problem is not the same as being able to articulate a research need, much less to assist in the design of a research programme. Third, prioritisation of research is notoriously difficult; organisations throughout the world struggle with this problem.

(ii) *A capacity to communicate with researchers and to evaluate potential solutions:* Once research needs have been determined and prioritised, farmers' organisations need either to evaluate potential solutions, if they intend to take the lead in seeking solutions, or to be able to communicate effectively with their partners in technology development and transfer institutions. For organisations that are able to engage professional agronomists this may not be problematic. Such agronomists can not only physically demonstrate the benefits of new technologies to members but can also enter into a dialogue with the technology establishment. Farmers' organisations operating without professional support risk having their perfectly valid views discounted because they are not appropriately phrased or because representatives do not have the confidence to speak up in meetings in unfamiliar, formal surroundings. This has proved to be a difficulty which takes much effort to overcome. The South African Cane Growers' Association has a unique and very costly programme of institutional support and training for its small growers and their associations yet they still find it hard to ensure that these people's views on technology issues are adequately represented. Capacity-building work with organisations is therefore very likely to have to precede the development of effective structural linkages between them and research or extension bodies. The question then becomes who should take responsibility for such capacity building.

(iii) *Knowledge of and access to potential producers of technology:* One of the main reasons why farmers in general are unable to access technology is because they are unaware of how and where it is developed and whom they should approach if they wish to influence the research agenda. In principle, extension services provide a mechanism for two-way communication between farmers and research, but these are often the weakest link in the overall technology development chain. If farmers' organisations are to be effective they may need to have detailed knowledge of where critical decisions are taken. If all budget allocations are made at central government level and research agendas are set in national committee (as they have been in the ARC), it makes little sense to expend the resources of an organisation on lobbying a particular research institute (or vice versa). Access may also depend upon a cross-cutting web of formal and informal relations developed over a long period of time as well as access to a reliable retail level delivery system (see v).

In many cases farmers find themselves in a 'chicken and egg' situation. It is only through getting involved in on-farm trials etc. that they can gain a genuine understanding of the way in which research works and the way in which they might contribute. However, if they cannot speak up on technological issues it may be difficult to persuade researchers of the value of working on-farm; there is still very little on-farm research conducted in South Africa. A related problem may be that research and extension priorities are never made explicit. Often they develop in an *ad hoc* or organic way as the result of thousands of separate and perhaps politically motivated underlying decisions. Where this is the case, precedent is often the guiding principle for future decision-taking, and this tends not to be amenable to influence.

(iv) *Access to funds for communication and contracting:* Even if farmers' organisations have the human capacity to communicate with others, they need financial resources to be able to do so effectively (unless the costs of communication are borne by the research establishment). Money is also required to cover the operational expenses of engaging with others. More importantly, though, if they have funds at their disposal, there is a far greater likelihood that organisations will be able to ensure that their views are heeded and their needs are met. Large farmers' organisations, such as NAFU, have proved to be remarkably weak in terms of mobilising members' contributions and managing those funds to which they do have access.

(v) *Access to appropriate retail level delivery systems:* If members are to gain the full advantages of farmers' organisations' involvement in technology development, then the organisations must be able to provide technology inputs in the appropriate form, time and place to meet small farmers' requirements. This requires access to and the maintenance of effective marketing, training, extension and supply systems.

3. FOCUS ON SMALL FARMER COLLECTIVE ACTION

It is clear from the study that neither NAFU, nor any of the smaller farmers' organisations in South Africa have these capacities at present and, to their credit, few have pro-actively engaged with the research and extension organisations[3]. For example, NAFU is extremely resource-constrained. Members have proved unable or unwilling to contribute the R25 which is the official membership fee. As a result, the only NAFU staff who receive payment for their work are the four headquarters staff. All other NAFU officials operate on a voluntary basis and do not even receive money to cover the expenses they incur attending meetings at a regional or national level (which are very frequent for the small core of dedicated NAFU officials).

It also faces many unresolved problems about how it should relate to its membership. This `membership' has three effective levels: paid-up members; those individuals who are members of a local group which claims to be affiliated with NAFU; and the whole constituency of black farmers in South Africa. Perhaps its first priority should be to address the needs of paid up members since while it was possible to establish the union on the basis of a shared interest in agriculture and a general belief in the value of such an organisation, it may not be possible to sustain it on the same basis. Yet NAFU presently holds no reliable membership lists. Furthermore, since its current status in South Africa derives more from its potential to speak for all black farmers, than from its actual relationship with its members (even if they were identifiable) it clearly cannot ignore its broader representational role.

However, black farmers in South Africa are far from being homogenous or unified in their needs. During field research doubt was expressed by representatives of the Gauteng Farmers' Union (not affiliated to NAFU) as to whether NAFU could represent both urban farmers and `rural' or ex-homeland farmers. Perhaps a more serious concern is whether NAFU's NAFCOC (National African Federated Chamber of Commerce and Industry) origins, its association with a commercial oil company (Total Oil sponsors the General Manager's post) and its dire need of financing will not cause it to neglect some of the most resource-poor farmers in the country. Many of these are not considered to be real agriculturalists, partly because the size of their holdings and their lack of resources in general, make them effectively unviable. While they may aspire to commercial holdings, and most already market a good proportion of their produce, they may never be able to fit in with NAFU's constitutional objective to `encourage a move among its members from subsistence to commercial agriculture'. Neglect of resource-poor farmers seemed to be a genuine possibility in the field work area in the Northern Province.

On the other side of this argument lie established or emerging black commercial farmers (for example in Mpumalanga and in the North West Province) who refuse to affiliate with NAFU because they fear that this will hamper their financial prospects and movement towards commercialisation. They feel that the Union has little to offer them. In the North West such farmers recently established the North West Farmers' Union in collaboration with established commercial, white farmers who had broken away from the Transvaal Agricultural Union. On the Makatini Flats in KwaZulu Natal emerging small scale cotton farmers opted to join the commercial Natal Farmers Union.

NAFU has attempted to form a link with input supply organisations but no major impact has yet been recorded. Productive linkages with commercial co-operatives have also not yet been promoted, possibly because of the fear of domination. An accord with the co-operative Business Chamber of the SAAU might pave the way for such linkage agreements.

Clearly with such issues outstanding, NAFU is very far from being able to identify and prioritise members' technology needs and supply systems and having had only broad discussion with the ARC on technology matters it is not yet fully aware of the way in which the system functions. Obviously this difficulty is compounded by current changes in the way in which the agricultural research system does operate (which perhaps makes the current lack of engagement rational, in terms of saving effort).

One other concern, which may be particular to South Africa because of the number of organisations which were born during the years of struggle, is that NAFU's relationship with other bodies or vehicles for empowerment is very poorly defined. In the area in which we conducted research in the Northern Province (around the ARC's Nondweni station in the former Gazankulu area) NAFU and the garden clubs (few of which had heard of NAFU and even fewer of which were affiliated to it) were by no means the only players in rural development. Other major role players in the area include: the Department of Agriculture, traditional leaders, Civics, Development Forums and Local Government Councils. Minor role players include: Boskop training centres (which runs a scheme at the Nondweni station), the ANC Women's and Youth Leagues, the Farmer Co-operatives, the Gazankulu Development Corporation, the Development Bank of Southern Africa (DBSA), Universities and various NGOs who have embarked on projects. This range of different stakeholders certainly complicates NAFU's ability to represent farmers in the area. As an example, there appear to be no formal links between the tribal authorities and the community level groups or NAFU structures more broadly. The NAFU representative in the area stated that he would like NAFU to be present at meetings of the tribal authorities but that this may be a

problem for NAFU cannot afford to cross the chiefs. For their part, local civic and development forum representatives did not feel that NAFU plays a major role in the area and they knew little about the organisation.

4. CONCLUSION

This research into the potential of collective action in small scale farming makes it clear that the key to effective change in the technology development and supply system in South Africa, and thus to much needed productivity increases amongst black, small farmers, is held by the technology system itself. Researchers and extensionists must recognise the importance of small-scale, commercial production and accept that meeting the needs of small-scale farmers is equally valid an objective as working on large-scale, capital intensive solutions. They cannot rely solely on an collective action organisation such as NAFU or any of the other emerging farmers' organisations to force this point.

In the absence of significant support, small farmers' organisations (as currently constituted) can be expected to play a restricted role - if any at all - in agricultural technology transformation. Small farmers' organisations in South Africa are not yet sufficiently united, powerful or technologically-aware to force the opening of doors on their own initiative. NAFU does not have a coherent or proactive strategy or resources in place either to help increase the supply of relevant technologies or to help members gain access to existing technologies; it is not yet even effectively involved in 'small-scale' technology activities such as input supply.

One of the major lessons which must be drawn from this is that broader support to farmers' organisations to build capacity and particularly to develop internal communication mechanisms is likely to have to precede support for particular technology initiatives. Proven success in such individual technology initiatives is itself likely to have to precede more general representational involvement of farmers organisations and particularly politically motivated unions in the agricultural technology system.

NOTES

1. This is of growing importance in the research area as clients are increasingly being asked to contribute to the costs of research; ARC institutes are supposed to attain 30% of the funding from external sources.

2. Farmers' organisations can, it is assumed, prevent members from diverging from our undermining group activity and make investment decisions on behalf of all members which reduces the scope for members to free-ride.

3. Had they done so, they might have undermined their own long-term credibility.

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