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EMPOWERING SMALL FARMERS' ACTION : THE CASE OF TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER

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Collective action could be the logical route to empower small farmers' organisations to address members' needs and consolidate demand; aggregate members' economic power and address market failures. This paper draws on research focusing on the role of farmers' organisations in the area of agricultural technology. This research makes a case for the role of farmers' organisations in the commercial farming system in South Africa, and thus to much needed technology transfer. In the absence of significant state support for particular technology initiatives, farmers' organisations are expected to play a restricted role - if any at all - for they are unlikely to be able to compete with the opening of doors on their own initiative. One of the main functions of farmers' organisations is to build capacity and particularly to develop the support for particular technology initiatives.

1. INTRODUCTION

Collective action is, in many respects, the logical route to empowerment for farmers. By working together farmers' organisations can, in principle, identify members' needs and consolidate demand; aggregate members' economic power¹ and address market failures² (Hagedorn, 1992; Becker, 1983). These capacities would seem to make farmers' organisations the ideal partners in the area of agricultural technology transfer, 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.

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 considerable potential for farmers' organisations to promote farmer-to-farmer exchanges and farmer-to-farmer extension, few have succeeded in doing so across a broad front, although there are 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 a well-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 emerging small farmer co-operative successfully linked up with the commercial Oos Transvaal Landbou Koöperatief (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 accommodates such arrangements is found in the form of outgrower schemes which exist in the sugar and 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 following 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, as 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 mainly in 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. The prioritisation of research is notoriously difficult as organisations throughout the world struggle with this problem.

- (ii) *A capacity to communicate with researchers 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

(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 this 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 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 and 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 the capacities at present and, to their credit, few have proactively engaged with the research and extension organisations³. 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

problem for NAFU cannot afford to cross the chiefs. 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 and 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 research is that broader support to farmers' organisations to build their capacity and particularly to develop internal communication mechanisms is likely to have to precede support for particular technology initiatives. Proven success in some 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 attract 30% of the funding from external sources.
2. Farmers' organisations can, it is assumed, prevent members from diverging from our underpinning group activity and make investment decisions on behalf of members which reduces the scope for members to 'free ride'.
3. Had they done so, they might have undermined their own long-term credibility.