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IDENTIFYING INTERMEDIARY ROLE OF OPINION LEADERS IN ROMA VALLEY, LESOTHO

Akintunde, M. A. O. and Thetsane, N.

Department of Agricultural Economics and Extension, National University of Lesotho, Maseru, Lesotho

Correspondence e-mail address: maakintunde@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The study was aimed at investigating intermediary roles of opinion leaders. Key objectives were to describe perception of farmers regarding personal attributes of farmers; agricultural information dissemination by opinion leaders; roles and identification of opinion leaders. The study was carried out in six villages in Roma Valley and quantitative research design was used. Systematic random sampling was used to come up with 60 respondents, and data were collected using structured questionnaire. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics. Findings reveal that opinion leaders are useful in delivery of information based on the perceptions of farmers in Roma Valley; they are identified by the traits they possess, interests of farmers and other factors. The study found that opinion leaders are young and mature adults; most of them are educated and have high socio-economic status compared to their followers. They are also able to access agricultural information from the internet which farmers were found not to be accessing.

Keywords: Opinion leaders, personal attributes and agricultural information

INTRODUCTION

Roma valley is a rural area in which the National University of Lesotho is located and most people practise agriculture; therefore they need information on innovations for improved production. Farmers in Lesotho depend mostly on radio, television and extension agents as information sources, but some families cannot access these sources. Opinion leaders can work as a helping hand to assist in disseminating agricultural information to farmers. Duncan and Peter (2007) stated that opinion leaders can act as intermediaries between mass media and the majority of society and the fact that they influence flow of information from the media to followers, in a two-step flow model.

According to Ronald (1999), opinion leaders are more precisely, opinion brokers who carry information across social boundaries between groups. Valente and Pumpuang (2007) stated that opinion leaders are people who influence the opinions, attitudes, beliefs, motivations and behaviours of others. Opinion leaders are from within the villages and Thomas (1996) refers to them as early adopters who give information to late adopters. Leeuwis and Ban (2004) stated that different people can be opinion leaders on distinct matters and for different groups of people and that opinion leaders tend to be influential only in specific parts of the community. This can affect the diffusion of agricultural information because of this differential behaviour.

As defined by Williams (2005), opinion leadership has the ability to informally influence the person's attitude and behaviour in a desired way or a two-step flow of communication in which information passes through media first and reaches the opinion leaders, who then pass it to fellow farmers. Opinion leaders are risk takers, they are not reluctant to adopt innovation first, and are not afraid of failure.

Opinion leaders work as middle men between the extension worker and the farmers. They get

information from the extension workers to disseminate to farmers and they do this effectively. According to Ronald (1999), opinion leader's conversation makes the innovation contagious to the people with whom they talk. They are believed by farmers because they are part of the villagers who would want to do the best for the villagers, hence the success in adoption of innovations. Influential people are expected to have three important traits; they should be convincing, know a lot and have a large number of people (Iyengar *et al.*, 2009). Because the opinion leaders are influential, they have the same traits. Some may have had good education or are experts and have the desire to know about new innovations.

Opinion leaders are influential, able to successfully convince farmers to adopt innovations and accelerate the rate of diffusion of information, and are willing and able to assist farmers with information they need. Leeuwis and Ban (2004) stated that opinion leaders are influential people in shaping opinions of various kinds. Duncan and Peter (2007) noted that the influence of opinion leaders is direct and derives from the informal status of individuals who are highly updated and respected. Williams (2005) stated that factors that are worth considering about opinion leaders being liked and respected by farmers are that they make wise decisions and have clear understanding of local needs. In developing countries, innovations are transferred to farmers in a top-down approach where farmers are told what to do without looking at their real needs. This is why the innovations fail because farmers are not interested.

Reflecting on post-apartheid South Africa, Duvel (2008) stipulated that white communities have a greater percentage of opinion leaders and socio-economic status tends to be the important barrier to accessibility, while in black communities, distance or physical accessibility is a serious constraint with the result that about 80 per cent of the opinion leaders to be consulted live within a 2kilometre radius. Because of limited number of



the opinion leaders, farmers have to travel a long distance to reach one. This happens in places where the villages are far apart from one another.

Duvel (2008) noted that, in developing countries, there is a shortage of extension workers to facilitate quick dissemination of agricultural messages. The opinion leaders can play a major role, especially, in developing countries in diffusion of agricultural information to close the gap of fewer extension agents to farmers.

A small number of farmers are able to access agricultural information through different sources and a large number cannot access up to date information concerning agriculture, hence the study described the characteristics of opinion leaders as perceived by farmers to effectively pass information to farmers to bridge the existing gap between farmers and extension workers

The purpose of the study was to investigate the perceptions of farmers in Roma valley regarding the characteristics of opinion leaders. The specific objectives are:

- i. To describe the perception of farmers regarding personal attributes of opinion leader.
- ii. To describe the perceptions of farmers regarding agricultural information dissemination by opinion leader.
- iii. To determine the identification of opinion leaders in Roma Valley and how they can be used by extension agents.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in Roma valley. The quantitative design was used and was cross sectional. Data collected was transformed into numerical form. Quantitative research is used to quantify the problem by a way of generating numerical data or data that can be transformed into usable statistics. It quantifies attitude, opinions and behaviour (DeFranzo, 2011). Population of the study was farmers from following six villages in Roma Valley: Mafikeng with 123 population size, Thoteng (401), Liphehleng (126), Hatabutle (271), Ha Mafefooane (279) and Mahlanyeng (129). A sample was chosen proportionately from each village to come up with a total sample of 60 respondents. Simple random sampling was used in selecting the sample of the study from the villages. Questionnaire with both open ended and close ended questions was used in the study. Instrumentation was developed with the use of literature review and consultations with experts.

To test for reliability, the instrument was administered on 15 farmers. Cronbach Alpha

Formula was used to test for reliability coefficient which was found to be 0.77.

Primary data was collected using interview schedule and executed through face to face interview with the farmers. Quantitative data were analysed using and was presented with frequencies and percentages.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The demographic characteristics of opinion leaders that were collected from the farmers include gender, age, marital status, educational level source of income and socio-economic status. The findings relating to these characteristics are presented in Table 1. The results reveal that fifty three percent of respondents receive advice from females and 47% from males. This shows development of women in agriculture as it was known to be man's activity. Majority (70.0%) of their advisers were young and mature adults, while 30.0% were elderly people. Young people are being engaged in the development of agriculture other than in the past when old people were the ones interested in agriculture. The majority (75.0%) were married, 23.0% were widowed while 2.0% were single.

Forty-eight percent of advisers had formal education qualifications (Primary School Leaving Certificate and Junior Certificate), 38.0% had post-secondary school education qualifications (certificate, diploma and degree) and 14.0% had non-formal education. This results show that farmers use people that are educated and understand our second language in case farmers need interpretation, they can do that without the problem.

The majority (73%) of respondents showed that their opinion leaders get income from farm produces, while 68% of them are employed. This may imply that farmers do not easily access the advisers who are employed because they spend most of their time at work other than the ones who are selling their products.

Majority (70%) of the respondent had lower socio-economic status compared to that of their advisers, 24% of the respondents had the same socio-economic status as their advisers and minority (6%) had high socio-economic status to that of the adviser. These results implied that people prefer to get advices from people that are wealthier and consultations for advices may be difficult because those people might be too busy. These findings are similar to that of Duvel, 2008 who stated that farmers consult people with higher socio-economic status compared to theirs.

Table 1: Distribution of farmers by demographic characteristics of their opinion leaders

Demographic Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Sex		
Male	28	46.7

Demographic Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Female	32	53.3
Age		
25-35 years	18	30.0
36-45 years	24	40.0
46-55 years	7	11.7
More than 55 years	11	18.3
Marital Status		
Married 45	45	75.0
Single	1	1.7
Widowed	14	23.3
Educational Level		
Primal School Leaving Certificate	3	5.0
Junior Certificate	26	43.3
Higher education	23	38.3
Non-formal education	8	13.3
Source of Income		
Employment	41*	68.3
Farm produce	44*	73.3
Socio-economic status		
Much higher than respondents	17	28.3
Higher than respondents	25	41.7
Same as respondents	14	23.6
Lower than respondents	4	6.7
Much lower than respondents	0	0

*Multiple responses

Source: Field survey, (2017)

Personal attributes of opinion leaders

The respondents were asked to indicate their opinions on whether the selected traits are the traits that a good leader should possess. The findings reveal in Table 2 that the following were traits that need to be possessed by a good leader: reliability (100%), accessibility (100%) and communication skills (90%). Surprisingly, respondents did not consider honesty (2.0%) as one of the attributes of an opinion leader. The study found that accessibility is an important trait when 100% of the respondents indicated that indeed accessibility was one of the characteristics that the adviser should possess. The implication is that accessibility of an individual is considered when choosing the adviser. Accessibility of the adviser to the farmer can be determined by the socio-economic status of the adviser to that of farmers. The higher the socio-economic status of the adviser to that of a farmer the harder it becomes to consult for advices. According to Williams (2005), knowledge without

accessibility to other people in the social groups will prevent the knowledge from being available to others.

All (100.0%) of the respondents opined that the adviser should be reliable. That is the adviser should have access to the latest information and can be trusted depending on whether an individual has helped people and they were able to overcome their problems after the assistance. Majority of the respondents (90%) chose communication skill as one of the good traits a leader should possess. A leader should have the ability to communicate with people and listen to the followers. This will make people understand what is being delivered to them and develop interest and this may lead to high adoption rate.

Majority (98%) of the respondents regarded honesty as less important trait an adviser should possess. Honesty or dishonesty of the adviser does not have an impact on the farmers as long as they get the help they need.

Table 2: Distribution of farmers' perception regarding personal attributes of opinion leaders

Personal attributes of opinion leader	Yes (%)	No (%)
Reliability	100.0	0.0
Accessibility	100.0	0.0
Communication skills	90.0	10.0
Honesty	2.0	98.0

Source: Field survey (2017)



Farmers' perception of dissemination of agricultural information by Opinion Leaders and their roles

This covers the way opinion leaders disseminate information to other farmers, how they influence farmers and the information sources used by both farmers and the opinion leaders. The importance of opinion leaders in extension is also included.

The findings in Table 2 show that majority (98.3%) of the respondents said opinion leaders raise awareness as a way of influencing farmers, 76.7% indicated that their advisers persuade farmers. Most of the respondents (68.3%) did not agree that opinion leaders reinforce norms. Thomas (1996) refers to opinion leaders as early adopters who give information to late adopters and in the study 55.5% of respondents said opinion leaders are first adopters. Weimann *et al.* (2007) stated that opinion leaders influence the behaviour of their followers through raising awareness and persuasion.

Most (95.0%) of respondents said that opinion leaders play a role in extension delivery by diffusing information and 76.7% said they increase the rate of adoption.

Majority (93.0%) of the respondents said they used radio to access information, 16.0% accessed information through extension workers, while 33.0% and 5.0% used television and newspapers, respectively. Fifty eight percent of the respondents indicated that their advisers get information from radio, 56% from extension workers, 52% from internet, 40% from television and 25% from the newspapers. Advisers get information from internet and extension workers as the different source from their followers and this implies that opinion leaders know much more than the farmers and are very important.

High proportion (86.7%) said that opinion leaders were very useful, while 90.0% got information from their advisers by consulting and 10.0% through meetings in their groups.

Table 3: Distribution of respondents by dissemination of agricultural information by opinion leaders

Dissemination information by opinion leaders	Yes (%)	No (%)
How do opinion leaders influence farmers?		
Raise awareness	98.0	31.7
Persuade farmers	76.7	23.3
Reinforce norms	31.7	68.3
They are first adopters	55.0	45.0
How do opinion leaders help in extension?		
Diffuse information to the community	95.0	5.0
Increase the rate of adoption	76.7	23.3
Information sources accessed by opinion leaders		
Radio	58.3	41.7
Internet	51.7	48.3
Television	40.0	60.0
Extension officers	56.7	43.3
Newspapers	25.0	75.0
Information sources accessed by farmers		
Radio	93.3	6.7
Television	33.3	66.7
News paper	5.0	95.0
Extension agents	16.7	83.3
Is the information from other sources clear?	66.7	3.3
Are opinion leaders useful?	86.7	13.3
How is information disseminated to farmers by opinion leaders?		
Consultation by farmers	90.0	10.0
Through farmers groups	10.0	90.0

Source: Field survey, (2017)

Farmers' perception of identification and improvement of opinion leaders

The respondents were requested to give their opinions regarding the procedure used in choosing the adviser and what can be done to improve their

knowledge. About 58.0% indicated that they identified opinion leaders by their social interpersonal relationship, while 36.7% look at the role a person plays. Only 5% identified opinion leaders by observing them.

Table 4: Distribution of respondents regarding identification and improvement of opinion leaders

Questions on opinion leaders	Frequency	Percentage
How is opinion leader identified?		
Observation	3	5.0
The role a person plays	22	36.7
Self-identification	0	0
Social interpersonal relationship	35	58.3
Do the whole community choose the person they get advice from?		
The community consult one person for advice.	46	76.7
Different groups have their own advisers.	11	18.3
Some people go to the people they feel comfortable to seek for help.	3	5.0
What procedure do you use in choosing the best opinion leader?		
Look at the way they communicate with other people.	7	11.7
Look at the number of people who nominate an individual and get help.	9	15
Look at the number of people who consult an individual and get help	9	15
Look for a person with experience and high production level.	22	36.7
Look for a person with skills and knowledge.	11	18.3
Look for a person with high education level.	2	3.3
Do the extension workers know of the existence of opinion leaders?		
YES	25	41.7
NO	35	58.3
How can skills and knowledge of opinion leaders be improved?		
They can be taken to the workshops by extension works.	12	20.0
They can be given trainings.	34	56.7
They can work together with extension workers	7	11.7
They can be introduced to the extension workers as the representative of the community.	2	3.3
Do not have any idea	5	8.3

Source: Field Survey, (2017)

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

It can be concluded that opinion leaders play a major role in updating farmers and helping them with their problems. Farmers get advice from people with higher socio-economic status than theirs. Opinion leaders disseminate information through farmers' groups and consultations by farmers because these leaders are able to influence farmers' behaviour.

It is therefore recommended that extension workers should identify and recognise opinion leaders and make use of them in dissemination of agricultural information. This will greatly enhance the effectiveness of their job since the leaders are members of the community and already interacting with the farmers.

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