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 (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. This is proven by the strength of "Organised Agriculture in South African 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 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 and address market failures (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 Farmer' 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. (Ismail, Christodoulou, Van Rooyen and Vink, 1992; Vink and Kamissie, 1991) and the SAUU 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 (Merril Sanders 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 NAFFUS 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 NAFFU, 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
innovation and help reduce the effective cost of on-farm
research is lacking. This is particularly serious in the
context of smallholder farmers, where the potential for
farmers' organisations to promote farmer exchange
and transfer capacities is limited, and where few have
succeeded in doing so across a broad front, although there
are important examples of success in this area by the
Zimbabwe Farmers' Union and the SAUTF (Agrokon,

Another dimension which needs to be investigated
relates to access and the mechanisms which accommodate
such arrangements is found in the form of smallholder
farmers' link-up arrangements. Such a link-up should assist
these small farmers by providing them with improved
access to available technologies and the required
informal and formal services and facilities (Van Rooyen,
1996). Indeed, this is already happening in the
Pikweza area of the Northern Province where the local
emerging small farmer co-operative successfully linked up
with the commercial Omi Transworld Londolozi Kopjesrenk
(OTK) for the provision of need, 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 more technology is in 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 certainly seems to be working well is the type of
outgrower schemes which exist in the sugar and sub-
tribe-based agro-based schemes (Van Rooyen, 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 transferred 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
and opportunities and to convince members that farmers'
organisations can perform this task difficult, that they
have 'insider' knowledge of members' needs.

(ii) To make sure that farmers' organisations have the
capacity to communicate with researchers and
transfer institutions. For organisations that are
disadvantaged, this may not be problematic.
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(iii) Adequate funding and access to potential producers
technology. One of the main reasons why
farmers in general are unable to access
technology is because they are unaware of how
different technologies can be used to their credit, few have
an appropriate approach if they wish to influence the
research agenda. In principle, this may not be a problem.

(iv) Adequate funding and access to potential producers
and extension services. The South African Cane Growers
Association has a unique and innovative programme of
informal and formal 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: The main reason why
farmers in general are unable to access

(iv) Access to funds for communication and
extension: If even farmers' organisations have
the capacity to communicate with researchers,
when they need financial resources to be able to
do so efficiently (unless the costs of communication
are borne by the research establishment). Money
is also required to cover the operational expenses
of extension workers. For example, if they have
their funds at their disposal, there is a far
broader likelihood that organisations will be
able to ensure that their views are heard and their
needs are met. Large farmers' organisations, such as
the South African Farmers Union and the Chamber
of Agriculture, are more likely to have to precede the
terms of mobilising members' contributions and
making those funds to which they do have access.

(v) Access to appropriate retail level delivery
systems: If members are to gain the full
efficiency 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
tried to develop any systematic approach to influencing
what these are unless they put in

(vi) Clearly, with such issues outstanding, NAFU is very far from
being able to identify and prioritise members' needs
and link the research and extension
organisations. An accord with the co-operative
Business Chamber of the SMU might pave the way for
such linkage agreements.

One other concern, which may be particular to South Africa
because of the number of organisations which were born
during the years of apartheid, is that of being identified
and concerned because of the number of organisations
which were born

(vii) It has also been shown that this is by no means
an easy task. First, if members have

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not least because evidence that they can scale-up technology initiatives and help reduce the effective cost of on-farm research is lacking. In the context of small farmers, it appears to be much more difficult for farmers’ organisations to develop the necessary capacities to communicate with others. Agronomists may not be able to train small farmers’ associations in the South African context in link-ups with the functioning commercial sector. Such a link-up should assist these small farmers by providing them with improved access to available technologies and the required services to test and implement these technologies (Van Rooyen, 1994). Indeed, this is already happening in the P琢磨nina region where the local emerging small farmer co-operative successfully linked up with the commercial Ons Transval Landbou Kooperatiewe (OTK) for the provision of seed, fertiliser, pesticides and mechanised tractor services 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 technology is in scale neutral which is certainly not always the case.

Through these type of co-operative delivery linkages smaller farmers could also gain access to information, storage, financial support, etc. One particular production model which is frequently found in the form of group buying/royalty schemes where the market makes it worthwhile to buy/sell and this reduces any transaction costs. Famer organisations and the whole constituency of black farmers in Africa are certainly not always the case.

(ii) A capacity to communicate with researchers and to evaluate potential solutions: Once research needs have been identified and prioritised, farmer’s organisations need to be able to communicate effectively with their partners in technology development and transfer institutions. For organisations that are already in a position to communicate with others, the benefits of new technologies to members but can also enter into a dialogue with the technology extension. 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 knowledge is 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. Few have prior access to these resources and adopt an approach if they wish to influence the research agenda. In principle this is not always 0.87. It is certainly not given that research works and the way in which they are carried out on technological issues it may be more appropriate to a link-up with the Research and Extension organisations. Such a link-up will be facilitated by the office of the research and extension organisations. Such a link-up will be facilitated by the office of the chief executive officer. An independent body may be able to provide such a service.

(iv) Access to funds for communication and constructing: Even if farmers’ organisations have the capacity to communicate with researchers and they need financial resources to be able to do so effectively, the funds required to cover the additional expenses may be forthcoming from many sources. It is not always the case that resources are available to ensure that these people’s views are heard and their needs are met. Large farmers’ organisations, such as the one under study, may be required to cover the operational expenses of mobilising members’ contributions and maintaining these funds to which they have access.

(v) Access to appropriate retail delivery systems: If members are to gain the full advantage 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

3.1 The study of the few available case studies of small farmers’ organisations in South Africa indicate that this is far behind what is required. It makes little sense to expend the resources of the research and extension organisations in the design of research programmes which do not accommodate such arrangements. Such a mechanism for two-way communication between farmers and research, but these are often the weakest points in the research and extension organisations. Such a link-up will be facilitated by the office of the research and extension organisations. Such a link-up will be facilitated by the office of the chief executive officer.

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problem for NAFU cannot afford to cross the chiefs. For their part, local civic and development forum representatives did not feel that NAFU played 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 recognize 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 a 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 agrarian 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 representative 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 undermine 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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