



Volume 5 No: 26 (2020)

Can extension and advisory services play a role in transforming smallholder farmers into business entities in Sub Saharan Africa?

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September, 2020



Citation

Chapota Rex (2020). Can extension and advisory services play a role in transforming smallholder farmers into business entities in Sub Saharan Africa? FARA Research Report.

Vol 5 (26): Pp 10

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ISSN:2550-3359

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Abstract

Agricultural extension and advisory services are at a crossroads. The paradox being that though the ultimate role of extension services is to transform the lives of smallholder farmers, the current state of the farming families still remains dire, trapped in persistent poverty and hunger in sub Saharan Africa. This paper tries to unveil this paradox through a systematic critique focusing on the lessons of the past to deconstruct what went wrong and rethinking about new pathways towards market-oriented smallholder agriculture. In this paper the transition from subsistence farming to commercial orientated agriculture for smallholder farmers is referred as 'agriprenuership'. The paper argues that for such a shift to take place, new pathways of implementing extension and advisory services are needed. The paper recommends some radical shifts that can transform the smallholder farmers in the 21st century to become business entities or 'agriprenuers' such as (i) rebranding the extension function, (ii) repositioning extension beyond a public good but as a key input in the production cycle, (iii) rethinking the content of extension and advisory services for agriprenuership, (iv) realigning extension linkages beyond the agriculture sector, (v) retraining extension workers for skills acquisition (vi) systematic targeting beyond social protection and (vii) embracing the greater roles of ICTs to increase reach and impact.

Introduction

Approximately 1.5 billion people, who mainly live in rural areas, are engaged and dependent in smallholder agriculture across the world (Ferris, S., *et al*, 2014). More than half a billion Africans are smallholder farmers. In some countries they make up as much as 85% of the population. Even in Africa's most urbanized countries that figure only drops to 55%. Smallholders produce 70% of the world's food, but they are particularly vulnerable to climatic and economic shocks, with many living from one harvest to the next. Despite their important role as food producers and rural stewards, the commercial prospects for millions of poor smallholders remain challenging.

It has become increasingly evident that the fortunes of smallholders will not change until farming at any scale becomes business, and smallholders and producers are treated as entrepreneurs (IFAD, 2011). Despite such potential for smallholders to become entrepreneurs, studies have shown gloomy results in Africa and Asia showing that 50-70% of smallholders are not transitioning from subsistence to commercial farming. A good example is in Zambia where studies have shown that transition for poor smallholders to high productivity agriculture ranges from 5%–25% each generation that means that most farmers, particularly those working with 1-2 hectares (ha) face challenges that leave them locked in poverty. (Ferris, S., *et al*, 2014). The transition process from smallholders' subsistence function towards market orientation is being referred in this paper as agriprenuership.

Knowing the agricultural extension is the center piece for agricultural development (Anderson, 2007), the question then remains, what role can extension and advisory systems provide in transforming smallholders into business entities.

This paper explores the current thinking of extension that has been embedded in its definition, goal and structure towards the need for new pathways in executing extension such as the need for (i) rebranding the extension function, (ii) repositioning extension beyond a public good but as a key input in the production cycle, (iii) rethinking the content of extension and advisory services for agriprenuership, (iv) realigning extension linkages beyond the agriculture sector, (v) retraining extension workers for skills acquisition, (vi) systematic targeting beyond social protection and (vii) embracing the greater roles of ICTs.

Extension and advisory services: The traditional discourse

Numerous institutions and authorities have defined agricultural extension and advisory services in different ways. In this paper the definitions of Christoplos in 2010 and Anderson in 2007 would be the primary reference due to the comprehensiveness of their definitions. The term agricultural extension services can be defined as "the entire set of organizations that support and facilitate people engaged in agricultural production to solve problems and to obtain information, skills and technologies to improve their livelihoods" (Anderson,

2007:6) whilst (Christoplos, 2010:2), defined 'agricultural extension as all the different activities that provide the information and advisory services that are needed and demanded by farmers and other actors in agrifood systems and rural development'. This paper will adapt the convergence of the definitions by Anderson and Christoplos since they both define the role that extension services need to provide i.e. (i) supportive and facilitative role, (ii) problem solving role, (iii) demand driven knowledge, skills and technologies flow and (iv) the ultimate role of improving livelihoods. This confirms the narrative by (World Bank, 2008) that shows that agricultural extension and advisory services includes technical knowledge flow and involves facilitation, brokering, and linkages with many actors in a complex system using different methodologies and approaches in order to improve the lives of smallholder farmers.

The agricultural extension and advisory service system drives agricultural productivity and farm income and ensures that smallholder farmers who are in majority are reached with information and appropriate knowledge on agricultural technologies (Christoplos, 2010). This in turn is vital for stimulating growth in other parts of the economy though accelerated growth requires a sharp productivity increase in smallholder farming combined with more effective support to the millions coping as subsistence farmers (World Bank, 2008). The Comprehensive African Agriculture Development Program (CAADP) recognizes the importance of technology generation and dissemination through agricultural extension and advisory services as prime movers of agricultural development in order to put agriculture on the path of sustainable growth (NEPAD, 2003).

The above discourse shows that be definition agricultural extension and advisory services have not been robust enough in embracing profit maximization and indeed market-oriented agriculture. Ferris, S., et al (2014) notes that overtime extension has focused on productivity through sustainable agricultural practices and soil health that has remained an operating paradigm for investments in smallholder farming. This calls for redefining of extension and advisory services since the call towards smallholders' becoming business entities not only need new ways of doing extension but also changing the whole discourse of extension and how it is measured as being effective or not.

The intrinsic problem in extension and advisory services to transform smallholder into business entity

The role of agricultural extension and advisory services has to be beyond diffusion of technologies but to show remarkable improvement on the livelihoods and wellbeing of farmers (Anderson, 2007). Despite this purported transformative role, agricultural productivity and livelihood status of the smallholder farmers still remain low (Birner et al, 2006). More also, knowing that income growth generated by agriculture is up to four times more effective in reducing poverty than growth in other sectors (Growth Commission, 2008). Concurring with this paradox, Anandajayasekeram et al (2009) posits that even though

strides have been made in modernizing agricultural extension by introducing pluralism, demand driven and decentralized approaches, hunger still persists, and smallholder farmers remain the poorest of societies. This confirms the worry expounded by Antholt (1992) that extension that is not in touch with and does not significantly contribute to the improvement of the life situation of its clientele has lost its legitimacy. Therefore, the key question remains, can the nature and structure of current extension and advisory services be able to transform smallholder farmers to become agripreneurs?

This century than ever needs to rethink the role of extension and undertake a critique of different extension approaches if there are up to the bill. This is on the background that extension system faces lots of challenges in scale and complexity with expectations to reach millions of farmers that have diversity of needs and different capacities (Antholt, 1992)

Studies that can critically analyze the role of extension vis-à-vis outcomes on the smallholder farmers are needed to spearhead new thinking of the role of extension (Arokoyo, 2005). This paper will therefore attempt to deconstruct the role of extension in transforming smallholders into business entities and provide pathways that need to be explored to turn around the fortunes of smallholders.

Pathways for extension and advisory services to help smallholder farmers to become agripreneurs

Extension and advisory services that will transform smallholder farmers into business entities need the following pathways:

Rebranding the extension function: As already alluded to, extension has been synonymous with subsistence farming due to the emphasis on food security by many sub Saharan African countries. In extreme situations, extension has been synonymous with the cycle of poverty narrative that has defined smallholder farmers in the past decades that have failed to get themselves out from the shackles of persistent food insecurity. In this regard, if the extension system will have a role in the transformation process then itself needs to transform and rebrand to show that it is ready to offer a unique service beyond food security goals. This transformation has to be in the whole continuum of training in the schools of higher learning, policy reform in the agricultural sector, investment and resource allocation for extension services and mindset change of the front-line extension workers among others.

Repositioning extension beyond a public good but as a key input in the production process: Smallholder farmers have been used and perpetually engineered that extension is a public good that has resulted in accepting any quality of the service and not investing in the same by those who benefit. For example, in Malawi, the government through the extension policy of 2000 posited the principle of 'those who benefit pays for the service' (Malawi Government, 2000). The principle though modern has become difficult to realize 15 years down the line. However, if smallholder farmers have to transform into business entities,

there is need to understand and reposition extension as an input of production in the same way land and labour is seen. It is from the belief that what you pay for, you will ensure it is of high standard, it is useful, it is effective and makes a difference in your enterprise. A smallholder farmer that decides to become a business entity has to understand that lack of knowledge is a recipe for losses hence will need to look for extension and advisory service that will make him/her competitive and maximize on profits on the market. In the long term, the extension service itself becomes more competitive and smallholder farmers will not be recipients of the service rather drivers of the services that meets their agriprenuership needs.

Rethinking the content of extension and advisory services for agriprenuership: The impact of extension and advisory services are no greater than the content of its message. In the past decades, the content of the message has been synonymous with the food security goals that governments in the sub Saharan African region have expounded on. However, the change to commercialization of agriculture and market-oriented smallholder farmers needs also new content that resonates with the needs and demand of turning a subsistence unit into a business entity. Producing with a margin and for markets both domestic and export requires meeting of minimum standards and quality of produce. It also entails a production that looks at volumes. (Ferris, S et al., 2014) notes that changing market conditions and consumer preferences require rapid adjustments in production and post-harvest technologies, and timely and effective transmission of market information that current extension needs to incorporate in order to meet the needs of the business entity. Therefore transformation of smallholder farmers into business entities need an extension service that provides information and advice not only on agronomic practices, but also in farm planning and management, post-harvest practices and management, marketing and alternative income generating sources and technologies, certification and quality assurance.

Realigning extension linkages beyond the agriculture sector: In as much as smallholder farmers operate within the agricultural sector, their transformation into business entities forces them to fully understand and integrate in the wide innovation systems and market space. In this regard, extension service is expected to play a linkage facilitation role beyond the traditional research and farmers triangle to rather wider networks dealing with agricultural financing, credit facilities, input suppliers and commodity exchanges among others to ensure quality produce that sells in lucrative markets. This implies that the extension worker is not the usual subsistence production expert rather a business advisor and networker beyond the agricultural sector.

Retraining extension workers for new skills acquisition: Expecting the extension workers and other service providers to change when the system that makes them has not changed is a tough call. Turning smallholders into business entities requires new skills beyond the production-oriented packages that smallholders have been used towards skills that transform the thinking of smallholders on issues such as marketing, financing, gross margin, competitiveness. Ferris, S., et al (2014) advocates that extension workers need to unlearn

the 'one size fits all' approach. Other agencies such as Global Forum for Agricultural Advisory Services (GFRAAS) and Catholic Relief Services (CRS) are already making strides at the need to have new skills for extension workers to be able to meet the new challenges. Therefore, institutions of higher learning need to analyze the market where their products are working and adapt their curricula accordingly. For those already in the service, continuous skills building in the new aspects towards market-oriented smallholder agriculture will be a must for governments to execute.

Systematic targeting beyond social protection: The fact remains that smallholder farmers are not homogenous despite extension and advisory systems most often assuming that the target is the same. Realizing that most African governments have taken food self-sufficiency is a key political matter; the same has tended to become a social protection goal to ensure that the poor of the poor have at least food on their tables. Without underrating such an important task by governments, the issue of agripreneurship is far beyond social protection hence needs to categorically define the target of such farmers who are ready to break even. It is therefore recommended that economically active, less endowed smallholder farmers be differentiated from those that need social protection efforts if any transformation can take place (Barrett, 2008). Therefore, extension services must be able to recognize different categories of farmers and find ways to effectively work with them depending on their ultimate aim.

Embracing the greater role of ICTs to increase speed, reach and impact: One of the major hurdles in the extension systems is reaching scale, timely with impact. With the shrinking numbers of extension workers that has enlarged the extension worker-farmer ratio, alternative options for reaching the millions of smallholder farmers faster. The advent of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), and the rapid boom of mobile phones have transformed information management and exchange in the world. Africa being part of this boom, offers opportunity in extension and advisory services for speed, linkages, feedback mechanisms, redundancy of messages and knowledge management that can make extension impactful and reach the millions of smallholder farmers.

Conclusion

The desire for change on the prospects of smallholders turning into business entities is not being heard among practitioners but is a loud call among the millions of smallholders who think things need to change in their farms in terms of productivity and access to better markets. Rethinking the role of extension and advisory services in such endeavor is not an option but a must by all actors in the sector. It is important to note that this will not happen in a vacuum, it will need commitment and leadership among the public, civil society and private sector to address other structural problems at both micro and macro-economic levels that affect smallholder farmers to turn into business entities. Therefore, the answer to our question is 'YES', extension and advisory services have a role to play in transforming African smallholders into business entities.

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