Food Mountain – a Multi-Functional Agricultural Extension Project in North West Province, South Africa.

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Abstract

The North West Province is among the Provinces in South Africa, which are significantly affected by poverty. 37% of households in the province are classified as poor, while 14% of households have no income. To address this problem the province established a poverty alleviation programme: “Mobilising The Poor To Feed Themselves”. This paper describes the multifunctional project: “Food Mountain” as part of the Integrated Food Security Programme. The poorest of the poor are identified in certain villages that are ranked according to a poverty index. They first receive food parcels and then agricultural starter packs in the form of vegetable seedlings and chickens. The beneficiaries of the project are trained in production as well as nutrition. This project can be a solution to alleviate poverty and hunger through agriculture.
INTRODUCTION

The North West Province is among the Provinces in South Africa, which are significantly affected by poverty. Using the definition of R800 ($114) per month as the minimum food basket, 37% of households in the province are classified as poor. 14% of households (90084) have no income. 52% of households in the province live below the breadline as defined by Statistics South Africa (Thahane 2003).

To address this problem, which affected all provinces in South Africa, cabinet approved The National Integrated Food Security and Nutrition Strategy. Cabinet recognized the importance of household food security in South Africa and therefore prioritised this aspect of the total National Strategy.

Under consideration of cultural norms and tradition, climatic conditions and natural resource settings the establishment of backyard and community gardens could help to reduce poverty and improve food security in rural and urban settings. The consideration is with respect to water management, water preservation and harvesting, irrigation techniques, cropping and small-scale animal husbandry.

The primary beneficiaries of the Scheme are made up of individuals and households that have no capacity to produce or buy food for themselves; individuals or households who have insufficient capacity to produce their own food in the rural areas; individuals or households with problems of access to inputs and markets to produce food in peri-urban areas; and individuals or households with insufficient income to purchase food (Anon, 2002).

In terms of Statistics South Africa's poverty indicators, which classify households according to imputed average per capita monthly expenditure, there are 2.2 million households or a total of about 14 million people who spend R800 ($114) or less per month (Anon, 2002).

It is envisaged that by the year 2015, hunger and malnutrition amongst the 2.2 million households would have been significantly reduced if not eliminated by the successful implementation of the Scheme together with the other schemes of the Integrated Food Security and Nutrition Programme. This would more than meet the commitments made by South Africa with respect to the Millennium Development Goals, the World Food Summit Plan of Action and the Johannesburg Plan of Action (Anon, 2002).

To achieve this, the province established a poverty alleviation programme: “Mobilising The Poor To Feed Themselves”. It is seen as a strategy to enhance the impact on poverty reduction especially on those society members who are so severely affected by poverty that their health is in danger through an inability to meet their basic energy needs i.e. three meals a day and nutritional needs.
PURPOSE OF PAPER

The purpose of this paper is to share with all the members of AIAEE, one of our successful agricultural extension projects that help to alleviate poverty. The objective of the project is to improve household food security of the resource poor in especially the rural areas of our province through agricultural production at household level.

OBJECTIVES OF THIS PROJECT

The ultimate objective of the project is to improve the food security at the household level using a broad approach that includes both food production and income generation strategies.

- To establish backyard production units which aim at both household consumption and marketing of the surplus.
- To increase nutrition and basic hygiene awareness amongst the poorest members of our society.
- To raise the level of awareness among civil society on the plight of the poorest of the poor in trying to secure a livelihood including the structural constraints faced by this group of citizens.
- To invite, encourage and lobby business and civil society as a whole to make a contribution to alleviating hunger amongst the people most severely affected by hunger as a first step towards enabling them to be players in the economy.
- To establish an infrastructure that can mobilize civil society, receive, distribute and account for the contributions of starter packs.
- To develop a process for identification of deserving beneficiaries and monitoring their status to ensure that they exit as they become less severely affected through employment, participation in other poverty alleviation programs etc.
- To strengthen the partnership between government and civil society in the fight against hunger.
- To establish with other provincial departments, cottage industries for participants to be able to generate income to meet their staple food needs, including fuel for cooking.

METHOD

Although the Department of Agriculture, Conservation & Environment (ACE) is the leading implementing authority, this project is a multi-functional effort. It is lead by the Premier’s Office in the province (highest political office in the province). Various departments are involved, they are: Departments of ACE, Health, Education, Social Services (SS), Water Affairs & Forestry (WAF) and Local Government.
The department conducted a baseline survey of the poverty level, household food security, nutritional status and food consumption habits of some of the households living in the rural areas in three of the four regions in our province. This was done to add to the national statistical information that was available. A representative sample of households was interviewed in each region.

In the Food Mountain Project the Department of Social Services (SS) started by distributing food parcels to the identified beneficiaries in the villages. The value of the food parcels was ± R500-00 ($71) per month. This was issued for three months in succession. During this three months the department of ACE had to distribute starter packs for backyard gardens and train the beneficiaries. Ideally by the end of the three months they would have had their own source of food.

The department of SS together with Health and the Local Municipalities identified the households that qualify to participate in this project. The following criteria were used:
- Households with an income of R200-00 ($28) or lower per month.
- Families that do not receive any form of grant or pension from the government.
- Child headed families.

The lists were verified and signed by SS and Local Government. All departments that participate in this project then used these lists to identify the beneficiaries.

**Starter packs**

The initial starter packs that the department distributed to the beneficiaries were made up as follows, although variations may occur as dictated by local conditions and guided by beneficiary inputs:

**Vegetable seedlings**
- Spinach
- Beetroot
- Carrots
- Cabbage (Optional)
- 30 meter fencing for garden
- 4 corner poles
- 8 droppers

**Seeds**: Veggie packs that comprises of seeds of the abovementioned vegetables.

**Fertilizers**: 2:3:2 or 2:3:4 and LAN

**Chemicals**: Dippel or Dipterex (for cabbage)

**Poultry**
- 20 x 4 or 18 weeks old indigenous chickens (dual purpose)
- 1 bag growing mash
- 3 bags crushed maize and sunflower (mix)
- Terramycin (antibiotic)
- 10 meter fencing relevant for chickens
6 x droppers
Drip Irrigation kit and Water tanks
Other protein supply packages that may be considered are:
- Goats – two ewes per household.
- Rabbits – this is an affordable source of protein, but cultural food habits often make it out of reach for most people.
- Sow for two households – this option is only for areas without swine fever.
- Milk cow shared by several households – this option often brings conflict in a community and should be managed very well.

The cost of the starter pack with chickens as protein option is R2 400-00 ($343) per household. The surplus produced should be sold in the village or any other outlet and the money used to buy inputs for the next round. This point is crucial for the sustainability of the project.

Training

All the participants will receive theoretical training before the starter packs are distributed and practical hands-on training at implementation. This training is in respect of vegetable production and chicken rearing. They will also be taught basic literacy, numeracy and financial management skills that enable poor people to take control of their lives.

The second big area for training is on food preservation, preparation and nutrition. It is very important for the success of the project that the beneficiaries understand how to preserve and prepare the vegetables that they produced to the best advantage of their families.

The different departments that are jointly involved in this project will provide the training to the participants. Attendance certificates are handed to all participants after the training.

Once the project is implemented and the vegetables and chickens are growing, extension officers will monitor the progress on a regular basis. Any problems that the participants may experience will be dealt with immediately.

Institutional arrangements

The implementation and co-ordination of the project are handled on three levels. The Office of the Premier is the main guardian of the project. The first level is the Provincial Co-ordinating Committee. The main function of this committee is to develop the integrated provincial programme, develop an implementation framework, facilitate and co-ordinate implementation and financing by partners, monitor and review the programme and provide support to district and local committees. The Provincial Co-ordinating Committee is outlined in Slide 1
The District- and Local Co-ordinating Committees function as outlined in the next slide.

Slide 2 – The District & Local Co-ordinating Committees
Participation by Civil Society

Another phase of this project is to get civil society involved by donating funds to an established trust fund. Any of the items of the parcels can be donated as well as basic foodstuff. The name “Food Mountain” is derived from this concept. It is anticipated that the donations will form a “Mountain of Food”. Awareness programmes will be launched among civil society and businesses on the plight of the poorest of the poor. They will then be lobbied to donate items as indicated above.

RESULTS

Baseline Survey

A summary of the results of the baseline survey that was conducted before the start of the project can be summarised as follows (Mokwele, 2002):

Hunger, poverty scale findings

Most households was found to run out of money to buy food, more than five days in a month, and they rely on a limited number of food to feed the children because of shortage of money to buy enough food. They eat less than they should and skip meals because of lack of food. The majority of the households eat two meals per day, and children also have been trained to have breakfast and supper only. The results imply that the level of poverty is high in our province. It was also indicated that when there is nothing to feed the family the mother would ask food from neighbours or relatives. Other live on credits from the local shops.

Dietary practice and nutritional status

The diet of most women interviewed in the regions was found to be deficient mostly in micronutrients. The protein intake was generally very low in all the regions with the consumption of meat once a month or once in three months. The carbohydrate intake is also generally high with a porridge made of maize meal being the main staple food and it is highly consumed everyday. There is very low intake of bread due to economical reasons. The consumption of fruits is also very low. The consumption of milk as the source of calcium was satisfactorily, high intake of cow's milk was satisfactorily in all regions.
Implementation of the project

The identification and verification of beneficiaries in the earmarked villages was completed and the food parcels of the department of Social Services (SS) was distributed. Our department started with the training and distribution of starter packs. As Phase 1 in the 2003/2004 financial year 23 villages in 6 districts were identified in my region to benefit from the project. In these 23 villages a total of 1896 households were identified. The total budget for Phase one in our region was R4, 5 million ($643 000). The rollout of the project took longer than anticipated. The reasons for this will be discussed under the challenges.

In most of the areas water is a problem. To help conserve water a simple drip irrigation system was introduced as part of the starter packs. In some of the households an ecosystem was also introduced where vegetables were planted in a round area with a 2 l plastic bottle in the middle. The bottle has small holes in to let the water slowly out into the ground. The bottle is then filled with water twice a day.

The sustainability and success of the project to restore food security could not be established yet, because of the short time since implementation of the project. So far the training and the rollout of the starter packs are successful. The first vegetables for household consumption were also produced. The chickens have not started to lay yet, because of the unavailability of point of lay hens.

CHALLENGES

Although this project was planned during 2002, implementation only started in 2003. As with all new projects this one also gave us some challenges during implementation. The challenges experienced so far and the solutions we came up with are as follows (Sethusha, 2003):

- Wrongfully identified beneficiaries – It came to our attention that some beneficiaries did not qualify. The solutions that were arrived at jointly by departments of ACE, SS and the Local Government was that the criteria be accepted by all, the Ward Councillor (elected member of Local Government in the Ward) and Local Coordinating Committee should lead the process of identification and physical verification of beneficiaries and lastly that the Ward Councillor and Area Manager of SS confirm the identification process by their signatures. The wrongfully identified beneficiaries be eliminated in a considerate way and they sign letters of understanding why they are eliminated.
- Misunderstanding the project goal by some politicians – In some cases Ward councillors misunderstood the process and used it for their own political gain. Workshops and meetings with the Local Municipal Leadership as well as District Municipal Leadership solved the problem.
Lack of interest from beneficiaries – some of the beneficiaries was only interested in the food parcels and not the agricultural part to produce their own food. In some areas only 60% turned up for training. The solutions arrived at were that the Ward Councillors and Local Coordinating Committee should workshop all participants in a specific area before the training starts. If someone is still not interested then they must sign a letter to that effect. These “vacancies” can then be transferred to another village or area of Phase 2 and be included in Phase 1.

Lack of sufficient suppliers – here it was the animal options that presented the challenge. There were no suppliers of 18-week-old indigenous chickens. Commercial breeds could not be used, as they would not survive the free-range conditions. The solution was to try and establish new entrepreneurs to hatch and raise chickens for the project. Also to establish young entrepreneurs to grow seedlings for the vegetables.

Long time for rollout of the process – getting the quotations, orders and supplies took longer than anticipated. Also the training process took much longer. The solution here was to be aware of this fact and build it in the planning of the next villages by ordering way in advance. The training took longer because of the lack of commitment of the participants. That was addressed under a previous point.

CONCLUSIONS

The project is still in the early stages, but is a way of alleviating poverty and hunger in our communities. The physical involvement of participants also helps to build a healthy mind and body.

This project taught the people to help themselves as an alternative to the dependency syndrome where they wait on Government to constantly give them handouts.

The sustainability of the project depends heavily on aftercare and extension by our extension officers.

EDUCATIONAL IMPORTANCE

The educational importance of this project is to communicate to AIAEE members and areas of the world with similar circumstances that there is a solution to alleviate poverty and hunger through agriculture. “Mobilise the poor to feed themselves!”
REFERENCES


