Searching For A Methodological Approach For Reaching Women Farmers

Jeff Mutimba, Makerere University
Eteneh Bekele, Alemaya University

Abstract

The marginalisation of women farmers is well known and well documented. Part of the reason for this marginalisation has been traced back to inappropriate training of agricultural development professionals – including agricultural extensionists. Alemaya University in Ethiopia has shown considerable responsiveness to such observations and criticisms by introducing a full course on ‘gender issues in agriculture’ in its agricultural extension degree programmes. In addition, the university has been examining ways of including gender issues in all other courses and degree programmes in the faculty of agriculture. However, field efforts to reach women seem to marginalise them even more by focusing on small and peripheral agricultural projects like poultry and vegetable production and non-agricultural projects. It is not clear what conditions need to be fulfilled for meaningful involvement of women farmers in mainstream agriculture. This study was, therefore, meant to enrich the debate on this issue by observing the application of participatory principles in true-to-life situations. The main objectives of the study were to (a) identify opportunities for getting women farmers involved in mainstream agriculture and, (b) to identify opportunities for improving teaching at Alemaya University. The study was done in the form of case studies of 23 field extension projects conducted by mid-career extension professionals in partial fulfillment of their extension degree programme at Alemaya University. The students were encouraged to experiment with innovative approaches of reaching women in the context of their projects. The study revealed a multiplicity of factors that mitigate against full participation of women in mainstream agriculture. Top among these were general lack of conviction on the part of the extension agents of the need to deliberately target women farmers and the extension agents’ belief that there were cultural barriers that forbid dialogue between women and men. The study concludes that, whilst supportive policies and gender-sensitive curricula at training institutions are necessary and essential pre-conditions, they are not sufficient in themselves to change deeply engrained attitudes at the extension worker/farmer level. Innovative and practical ways of breaking down the negative mentality that pays lip service to women participation still need to be investigated.