AIAEE Keynote Address

Sustainable Rural Progress with Public, Private and People Partnerships

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Introduction

I have practiced Extension throughout my career, which started in Zambia in 1960 in public sector extension and for the last 35 years in the South African Sugar Industry in private sector extension, so I shall be drawing on these experiences as they relate to the title of my address.

But first, some general comments. All of us, as extensionists, are almost exclusively dedicated to programmes that promote rural stability through agricultural development. Since the birth of many nations, which was based on man’s burning desire to reach out to unexplored lands and settle into an agrarian way of life, we cannot say we have achieved widespread agricultural sustainability to any great extent.

Here in the States, I am fascinated by the history of the opening of the west by land hungry settlers, while in my own country of South Africa, the great trek of the white pioneers into the interior three and a half centuries ago, and the migration of black tribes from the north were spurred on by the same visions. The early explorers in many other lands also had much the same expectations as agriculture became a burgeoning way of life, and virgin lands yielded a wide variety of food, fibre and fads such as tobacco and more recently drugs, which have generated considerable wealth world-wide, but to a small percentage of the global population.

But the dreams of these early farmers were often dashed by droughts, floods, market uncertainties, soil degradation, diseases and pests, and more recently population pressures. More importantly, their lack of knowledge made farming an increasingly difficult and risky occupation, while the first signs of environmental damage soon appeared. The need to generate knowledge to cope with the problems resulted in the development of agricultural research programmes, which lifted productivity to satisfy the needs of the fast expanding populations and extension became the vehicle for this to happen.

The birth of extension was a natural development as research outcomes gained momentum. New technology was only useful if it was suitably adapted for the right agricultural practices, and adopted by the farmers according to their local conditions.

World-wide, the commercial agricultural sector developed many successful and diverse high-tech farming systems, made possible by innovative research and extension programmes.

But what about the subsistence and small-scale farmers in the third world? Have they been left behind? They too require access to knowledge, albeit at a different level and coupled with the benefits of local experience.

In addition there is another critical dimension: environmental degradation through exploitation of natural resources is a galloping danger to the ability of agriculture to sustain mankind. Population explosions are putting increasing pressure on the land and its ability to produce adequate food.

Urban drift is a serious consequence in many countries as disillusioned rural dwellers seek a better future in the cities, but widespread joblessness there generates extreme poverty, hunger and a breakdown in law and order.
The point I want to stress is that in many countries rural and urban stability is being threatened by the drift of rural people who no longer see a future in farming.

It is for these reasons that extension has a pivotal role to play, indeed it is the vital link between the development of technology (research) and its application by the farmer in its most appropriate form. This will enable the use of best management practices in the most appropriate systems based on sound advice.

I believe we have a great responsibility as extensionists, to improve our effectiveness to attain progress towards a more productive way of life and long term stability in the rural areas.

So why has the extensionist’s impact been at times disappointing and below expectation?

Let us look at some of our apparent weaknesses.

- Invariably the top-down approach has been used “we know what is best for you”, so we failed to focus sufficiently on the client’s needs, preferences and abilities.

- Extension has been traditionally a public sector service, often inflexible, bureaucratic, under-funded and with inadequate resources leading to de-motivated extensionists.

- Programs are often too general, the client base ill defined, the goals not specific and they are spreading resources too thinly with limited results.

- Programs frequently consist of short-term projects, lacking continuity and with little or no follow-up. They should be on-going, long-term commitments if the progress is to be sustainable.

- Extensionists should be compatible, and integrated with the communities in which they work. In addition, their skills, resources and experience should match the needs of the client otherwise credibility is lost.

- Extensionists must work in close association with their resource base of technology and information such as the research centers. In fact they frequently operate in isolation resulting in poor or delayed use of evolving technology.

- It is difficult to make regular, direct contact with farmers, as many have part-time, additional employment and may not be resident on their farms.

- Poor communications where there are no telephones and access where roads are in bad condition make it difficult to set up effective programmes.

- Lack of resources such as audio-visual aids and materials for demonstrations restrict the extensionists impact to carry out good extension programmes.

- Inadequate pre-planning to determine the opportunities for developing new enterprises and stabilizing old with reliable market outlets.

Or, maybe the fault lies with the farmers – are they already self-satisfied and too complacent?

In reality, the old image of farming being a comfortable way of life with sufficient food, material satisfaction and recreation has been lost.

Agriculture has been losing its attractiveness for many as profit margins for the commercial farmer decline, and subsistence farmers see no future in remaining where they are. The challenge for extension is to turn these attitudes around and generate optimism.

Now let me return to the conference theme and the title of my talk, and away from the negatives I have described.

As a supreme optimist, which I contend should be an inborn strength of all extensionists, I believe we have the potential to be the catalyst to rebuild and develop agriculture in the rural areas of countries where farming is losing its appeal. Agriculture is, after all, a pillar of a
nation’s economy and Extension, by helping to establish development through well informed farmers can revive that strength.

But with agriculture presently under extreme pressure from dwindling profit margins and environmental concerns, extension has never had a better opportunity to make its greatest impact.

So let us explore innovative ways of making ourselves smarter extensionists. We need to improve our service delivery and strive for higher levels of achievement. To do this, we must identify the relative merits and weaknesses of the various role players, and the potential for farmers to respond to exploit their combined strengths to make meaningful and sustained progress.

**Public Sector Extension**

Let us consider the future responsibility of Governments in extension programs.

Last year, in my paper presented at the Trinidad and Tobago conference, I described the limitations in public sector extension in South Africa which can result in negative responses to extension initiatives. These include:

- The inevitable competition for funds and resources between Government departments, with agriculture often having a low priority.

- The need for extension to undertake regulatory responsibilities such as restraining environmental mismanagement; market controls; and land-use permits.

- The allocation of services between the larger commercial farmers (generally large taxpayers who can make a big impact on the economy) or the small-scale farmers (where progress is difficult and slow but the need for development is great).

- Political pressures which often distort the economic priorities.

These weaknesses are recognized in South Africa, and we expect to see significant changes in the delivery of extension.

Without doubt, Government, as a public service provider, must be responsible for and place a high priority on community development in rural areas where there is minimal scope for commercial agricultural development. In this situation, food security, health, education and social resources are the primary needs, with agriculture lower down the priority scale, so we do not see agricultural extension as having a significant role to play.

At the other end of the scale are the large commercial farms which are generally highly developed business enterprises often using advanced systems, and who require specialized advice on technology and economics, which can best be provided by private consultants or extension services who charge appropriate fees. Services from the Government for these farmers should be confined to the implications and application of statutory legislation. However, this privatized trend may result in an elitist service where the most needy farmers cannot afford the assistance they require, for example ADAS in England which only effectively reaches the top 10% of farmers. This imbalance needs to be addressed.

But in between, there is the very important and large group of land users with considerable potential, which we now refer to as the small-scale emerging farmers, and they are an important element in our drive to develop the impoverished rural areas. They generally farm on a few hectares of land; all are resource poor, and they have limited access to finance. To create the right opportunities for change, the following criteria are necessary:

- There is at least one agricultural enterprise or more, which has a reliable and predictable market with long-term stability.

- They need adequate land with security of tenure.

- The farmers must have the will and confidence to succeed.

- There must be facilities for suitable
enterprise finance.

· All the necessary support services must be available to them, in a coordinated program.

It is in this sector where the best prospects for progress towards sustainable rural development exist, and we must concentrate our limited resources on them. But it requires commitment from all the service providers, in particular reliable extension, which cannot be done solely by Government.

If we can successfully develop real growth in this sector by engaging the private sector and expanding our limited resources, then I am very confident we will see some dramatic progress. As Willem Zijp reminded us last year – we in extension have to mobilize the emerging farmers to take the initiative, have belief in themselves, and be receptive to change. They must make their needs known and put pressure on the decision makers. Without this we may well get off to more false starts.

Private Sector Extension

I will illustrate the potential of the private sector extension by describing the agricultural industry I work in.

The South African sugar industry produces on average 2.5 million tons of sugar per annum mostly in KwaZulu-Natal, which is manufactured from about 23 million tons of sugarcane grown on 420 000 hectares of land by 2 000 large-scale commercial farmers and 47 000 small-scale emerging farmers.

The sugar industry provides the finance to undertake all the research programs on the crop and its product, and two dedicated, integrated extension services ensure that all the sugarcane growers have access to the technology and information generated at its own Experiment Station (SASEX) near Durban. It provides the farmers with the opportunities to apply the best management practices on the crop, developed from comprehensive research programmes, backed by an integrated extension service.

Extension for the commercial farmers is funded through a special levy at a fixed rate per ton of sugarcane produced. However, the emerging farmers do not have the capacity at this stage to pay the levy, yet require good extension to improve their productivity, which at this stage is relatively low.

We therefore entered into an agreement in 1996 with the Government’s Department of Agriculture, who now provide additional extension staff plus a share in the overall costs, to work with our specialised extension staff equipped with the relevant technology to provide a much more comprehensive, skilled and effective extension programme for the emerging farmers, while also attending to their other crop needs.

This partnership is a role model for synergizing the combined strengths of the public and private sectors into a more powerful and effective extension service.

In order to address the need for short-term, seasonal sugarcane crop finance, the SA Sugar Association has for more than 25 years developed its Financial Aid Fund (FAF). This revolving fund releases loans to approved small scale sugarcane farmers at competitive interest rates to cover fertilizer, crop chemicals and planting costs which are recouped from the crop’s proceeds after harvest. The Fund is financed mainly from the sugar industry’s own resources.

A more recent development is the launch of another small-scale farmer finance scheme – an offshoot of FAF, the Rural Finance Savings Organization (RFSO). This enables farmers to invest their savings in village banks and then use it as surety for short to medium term loans for other farming enterprises.

A third fund, the Small Growers Development Trust (SGDT), has been established to provide for the training of these farmers in skills to improve their management capability. To ensure these courses are treated seriously, the farmers pay 10% of the costs with the balance
subsidized from the fund. A number of donors fund the SGDT including the SA Sugar Association itself, and also the premium we receive on exports of sugar to the United States (thank you, Americans, please add another spoonful of sugar to your coffee or tea at the break even if you don’t stir it - it helps our emerging farmer development programs).

Through these sources, our emerging sugarcane farmers have developed the capacity to move from their traditional subsistence sector into the commercial farming sector, and generate new wealth.

In the graph below we can see how yields of sugarcane have increased since the extension program was introduced.

To satisfy ourselves we are on the right track, we calculated the cost: benefit ratio of the Joint Venture to be certain we were not spending more than the increased returns to the growers. It is clear that at 1:12.5 per annum, the investment in extension has been highly beneficial.

This example of how a commodity-based agricultural industry can provide the technology, and financial services for a fully integrated program of research, extension and development, in partnership with the Government, is worthy of further consideration as a role model elsewhere.

But, there are of course limits to the extent such an organization, together with the Government, can commit themselves to development programs without outside support, and it is to the large players such as the World Bank that they will turn.

There are other examples of agricultural commodities produced in Southern Africa where farmer services are also provided through similar private structures, including the citrus, grape and wine industries in South Africa, tea, coffee and tobacco in Zimbabwe and Malawi, and many of the Agricultural Co-operatives who supply the inputs and market a variety of crops and products on behalf of their farmer members, provide credit and supply extension services. Likewise we heard last year of the Banana Board’s commitment to provide private extension in the West Indies. These services are seen to be better focused, effective and they have made a substantial impact on farm productivity for their particular commodity.
So far, the involvement of the private sector to support farmer services has been mainly restricted to large-scale commercial farming. It is only in recent times we are starting to explore and exploit private sector resources to the benefit of the emerging farmers as I have described. Yet the commercial benefits are potentially large for those who supply farming inputs such as fertilizers, chemicals, seed, fuel, and machinery; those who provide financial services; the co-operatives; and those who transport, process or market the crop. So they should all be seen as important potential sources of farmer support in research, extension and program implementation. There are numerous multi-national companies who generate a substantial income from agriculture, and who reap large financial benefits from their trade with the farmers.

Increased agricultural production through farm enterprise development and greater productivity would mean even greater turnover for these suppliers, justifying further investment in these programs.

The question is – how can this private sector involvement be developed?

We have all to come to terms with the fact that extension and development projects cannot be the responsibility of one provider. They are costly, require specialized skills and considerable resources. We must therefore identify all the potential role players, and create long-term partnerships to develop synergies, which will effectively combine all their strengths in the most constructive and cost effective manner.

However, the challenges we face are to make this buy-in attractive to potential private sector involvement, to co-ordinate the services available and ensure all partners are committed to a long-term program.

This is an issue we should pick up in our plenary session.

In South Africa, we have another interesting example of private sector involvement in rural development. Professor Johan van Rooyen of the University of Pretoria and Director of Agribusiness SA has masterminded a scheme where farm workers become shareholders in the land and the business operations of large scale commercial farms in partnership with the...
Consistent with the political initiatives to redistribute under-utilized agricultural land to previously disadvantaged rural people, these projects aim to maintain the strength of economy of scale in large farming enterprises without fragmenting them, while bringing rural dwellers into the enterprise with a direct share in the investment, the decision making processes, and hopefully to benefit from the profits, yet accept the risk that goes with being a stakeholder.

Already there are a number of farms operating within this project, and proving to be highly successful by creating a new opportunity for workers to become partners in market driven farm enterprises and helping them to grow with the wealth tree.

The principles of these farm shareholder schemes are superior to the settlement schemes sponsored by Governments in post-colonial Africa. In Zambia for instance, rural people were relocated onto plots of virgin land within large estate structures, and where the farming operations were organized by management teams requiring minimal input by the settlers. With little say in the operation and no stake in the business other than a small share in the profits, there was minimal motivation for them to become enthusiastically involved. Many of these schemes were not sustainable once the start-up funding was withdrawn and management handed over to the settlers.

The People – The Farmers

They are the ‘raison d’etre’ – the heart of the program yet they are often overlooked in the decision making process.

No extension program can be expected to succeed without the full participation of all the role players, at every stage. Starting with the identification of the problems, developing the solutions, preparing an action plan, implementing the program, regular monitoring of progress, with periodic evaluations of the benefits being obtained are a sequence of essential functions which must be well coordinated at all stages to keep the program well on track.

Referring again to the SA Sugar Industry, we have devised structures to oversee and co-ordinate our extension programs. Known as Extension Coordinating Committees or Research, Extension and Development Committees, they bring together the role players and partners and, importantly, farmer representatives, who meet regularly to monitor progress of programs, report on difficulties, identify solutions, and ensure that follow-up action is executed in a timely manner.

I recall the excellent, award winning paper by JR Vryrens at last year’s conference in which a project to increase rice production in Senegal was described. Meticulous preparation was undertaken before the extension program commenced, starting with the consultation process with the people, in this case the women, who identified important social and dietary needs which were not originally apparent. The involvement of the community from the start boosted the relevance of the project and gained the participants’ confidence who then gave their full commitment to the program. It was an excellent example of a model extension project.

In all extension projects it is essential to identify the leaders, opinion makers and early adopters who are the most influential people to serve on these committees and take over ownership of the programs once they are running smoothly. Farmers are notoriously slow to respond to change, preferring to rely on tried and trusted practices. It is therefore essential to obtain buy-in from the early adopters to avoid the possibility of negativeness or indifference undermining the pace and progress towards success. Extension programs must therefore be phased in as an evolutionary, rather than a revolutionary process. The traditional attitude of the conservative majority is to wait, and look over the fence to gauge how well their more adventurous neighbors, the early adopters are faring, before they accept new ideas. In fact I have always said that only a part of what we know as extensionists comes from our research results, the rest is what we observe from successful, innovative farmers who are quick to adopt and adapt practices to suit their own skills.
and local conditions.

The People – The Extensionists

They are also a most important cog in the wheel; so how do we get the best from them? An Extensionist must identify himself as being a full participant with the people involved in his extension programs.

To achieve this end, he should preferably have a common home language with the farmers, be adaptable to different levels of understanding, live in close proximity to the community, and feel comfortable to mix freely with them to the extent that he is a fully accepted. However, it concerns me when extensionists are unable to relate easily to the farmers. In fact, they sometimes elevate themselves above the people, which is contrary to building confidence, trust and an effective working relationship.

Extensionists must be adequately equipped to be efficient yet are often handicapped by having limited or no resources such as audio-visual aids and demonstration equipment. For each topic we use well-illustrated posters with simple statements written in the vernacular and laminated to make them durable and long-lasting, together with other appropriate tools and aids they need. It is equipment and materials such as these, which could be sponsored by commercial firms to underwrite the costs, while enhancing the quality and impact of the message portrayed. ‘Seeing is believing’ is a proven maxim, and especially with illiterate people. So much more could be achieved by extensionists, given the right resources to implement their programs.

Farmers, especially from poorer communities, are eager to learn and will often walk long distances to attend a talk or demonstration. To give them a bun and pop to refresh them, will prompt an enthusiastic response, with a long-lasting impact and ensure they return the next time – maintaining continuity of the program, which is so important. This again could be sponsored commercially.

Communication and travel difficulties are often restrictive and seen as limiting factors to efficient extension delivery. Setting up rural programs has an added difficulty when there are no telephones, although mobile phones have made it much easier to facilitate contact. Getting there is another problem if roads are in poor condition. The modern extensionist tends to expect a car to get around in, and if it is not a 4-wheel drive, is reluctant to go deep into the rural areas. Cars and transportation are a major cost of extension programs, and we really need to find a solution to this problem. As a young extensionist in Zambia, I used a bicycle and together with my assistant we moved around from base camp in this way, and I can assure you I had a much better ‘feel’ for the farms and the people, although admittedly it took longer to do so. Is the modern extensionist willing to ‘rough it’ a bit as we did then?

For an extensionist to be strongly motivated and effective there are a number of prerequisites to consider:

- Proper training to provide the right advice at the appropriate level of technology.
- Equipped with the necessary resources to perform efficiently.
- Carefully planned and structured programs each based on a defined target area of farmers with a clear set of goals.
- A well coordinated partnership with all role players to optimize service delivery and outcomes.
- A right sized program to enable adequate client contact and a reasonable chance of success.
- Motivation to generate enthusiasm and job satisfaction is important and should not be overlooked if we are to attract and keep the best people as winning extensionists.

The Value of Agricultural Extension: Its Worth to Rural Development

Before concluding, we must be certain that extension is a good investment. To do this, I will repeat the results of studies made by PA Donovan, and reported in the paper I presented at last year’s conference, in which the value of extension in and the respective costs of public and private sector extension in South Africa were compared.

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These studies highlighted the importance of research and extension being closely linked within a single structure as it is in the South African Sugar Association, and showed that research programs depend heavily on extension for effective adoption of technology by the farmers. Over a 30-year period increased yields could be attributed to research and extension in the ratio of 40:60. It also showed that the lag period between new technology provided by SASEX research and its adoption by farmers through effective extension is only 3 years. This was compared with 7 years for extension provided by the Department of Agriculture where research and extension are not operating together, which more than doubles the delay before responses are achieved.

While public sector extension was estimated to yield a positive return of a meager 3%, a number of private sector extension programs in Southern Africa showed a range of very favorable returns on investment in extension ranging from a low of 35% to a high of 236%.

It must be noted however that most of the private extension services studied were commodity based, which is always more likely to give higher returns, than general extension programs provided by Government.

Summary

I will summarize my ideas on future directions for agricultural extension and the respective roles of public and private services to the benefit of rural people. I will draw your attention to the issues which we should be considering as we look for ways to improve our service delivery, and strengthen our impact to enhance the development and stability of agriculture. I have concentrated in particular on those farmers who are emerging from subsistence into commercial farming systems and which offer the best prospect for success.

- Public sector extension should limit its extension responsibilities to community service development, subsistence farming for food sufficiency and regulatory issues based on legislation. This does not require highly qualified extension staff, but people trained and motivated as community workers.
- Public sector leaders should identify where the private sector can become a role player in extension, and create opportunities to develop appropriate partnerships and structures.
- Emerging commercial farmers present the most urgent need and challenge for development, which is politically, economically and socially important.
- The potential for public and private sector partnerships for emerging farmers is incalculable, but it needs to be identified, tested for suitability, and carefully coordinated with long-term commitments to the programmes.
- Commercial farmers do not require conventional, general extension, but should be serviced by specialist consultants or dedicated commodity extension from the private sector.
- Extension programmes must identify the client base, who must be receptive to change.
- The projects must be right sized for effective delivery, and have clear goals.
- Priorities should be based on long term viability through market analyses, and the potential to expand existing commodities and develop new ones.
- Projects must be environmentally friendly and sustainable.
- Private sector involvement can be obtained from a number of sources which include:
  - Commodity based industries as illustrated by our sugarcane programme.
  - Agricultural suppliers, for example fertilizer, herbicide, machinery, and fuel suppliers.
  - Agricultural co-operatives for markets, credit and services.
  - Processors of agricultural products, for
example wine or fruit juices.

- Financial institutions such as the banks and private sector trusts.

- Farmer representation and active participation in all stages of extension delivery, up to the evaluation of the programme.

- An extension levy, even if it is a fraction of the total cost, would develop a commitment and ownership by the farmers to participate fully in the programmes.

- We see extension programmes being driven and controlled in the following way:

  - A central coordinating committee, board or trust being established for each programme, headed by a principal role player. All role players will be represented on this committee, including meaningful representation from the farmers.

  - The responsibility of this committee will be to plan and implement the extension program, identify problems, provide solutions, monitor its progress, and evaluate its outcomes.

  - The committee will ensure sound partnerships are created, that all participants operate in unison to avoid overlapping, the best skills available will be utilized, with the necessary resources provided, and eventually reach the point where the project is self-sustaining.

The process is dynamic, and as new priorities arise they will replace those no longer relevant. The overall aim is to create a vibrant, viable and stable group of advancing farmers in the most cost effective and direct way possible. With successful farmers comes the ‘spin-off’ effect on the other, non-farming people in the community by generating new business possibilities that could further enhance the wealth and well-being of the whole community.

**Conclusion**

Extension has the potential to make substantial and sustainable rural progress, provided all the role players from the public and private sectors work together in close harmony with the people who farm the land.

Mr Chairman, I hope that these ideas I have shared with you from my African experiences in public and private extension over the past 35 years have stimulated your minds around the conference theme. Agricultural development is the crux in the process of strengthening rural communities. The importance I attach to developing partnerships between the role players to improve the success rate of extension programs will have prompted you to come up with questions, comments and other ideas when we open up the debate to the floor.