Needs Assessment of Extension Officers in the Limpopo Province of South Africa

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Introduction  Extension efforts in Limpopo Province of South Africa continue to have deficiencies in training of field-based officers, middle managers, and Department of Agriculture administrators responsible for the program. There are also a number of basic tangible resource needs within black African society which translate into shortfalls within the Extension system as well.

Purpose  The primary purpose of this project was to conduct a needs assessment of personnel involved in the Extension system of Limpopo Province, with a specific emphasis on field-based Extension Officers (EO). The objective was to identify the training needs of extension officers to meet the educational needs of emerging black farmers in Limpopo. The secondary objective was to deliver a training session to help EO’s begin to implement a comprehensive education program to meet the educational needs of emerging commercial black farmers. The third objective was to enhance the relationship between educational institutions in Limpopo, and Penn State’s College of Agricultural Sciences.

Information to be Shared  A needs assessment of more than 250 EO’s was conducted over a two-week period in May, 2005 in Limpopo Province. The U.S.-based component of the team was comprised of two Pennsylvania State University professors with extensive backgrounds in instruction, evaluation, and international agricultural development. The were joined by a county-based Extension educator with over 20 years experience in Extension methodology in crop production and commodity marketing and a limited exposure to international projects. While traveling in Limpopo, a mid-level administrator from the Department of Agriculture accompanied the U.S. team to provide background for the project, continuity, and to further refine ideas on an ongoing basis. The group conducted five days of needs assessments using a nominal group process at five separate locations arranged by the Department of Agriculture during the first week in Limpopo. During the second week, the U.S. educators conducted three days of training for a subset of the EO’s from week one, using U.S. materials adapted to South African needs and conditions.

Conclusions  Large deficiencies involving EO’s skill development in communication ability, computer usage, crop production knowledge and marketing skills, and the development of clientele relationships, were clearly identified by the team. This educational void exacerbates the slow pace of agricultural transformation from the previous white-owned farm economy and it retards the development of the emerging black commercial farmers.

Implications  Critical areas of training for EO’s needs to be addressed by the Department of Agriculture in Limpopo in the near-term to provide for the transfer of new technologies and knowledge needed by an emerging group of small scale farmers. Without this investment in human capital by the government in the very near future, the Province risks being marginalized by other advancing regions of South Africa, as well as, other developing countries.