

Short communication: It's always agricultural extension, what about agribusiness extension?

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Abstract: The underdevelopment of agriculture and rural communities of Africa has for long been attributed to inadequate extension service delivery. Thus, strengthening agricultural extension is a recommendation that still attracts significant attention in today's interventions targeting agriculture and related sub-sectors. Africa has seen enormous failures in the adoption of agricultural technologies over time. Unfortunately, the same recommendation still exists. Agricultural extension in Africa is synonymous to good agronomic practices. This half-baked understanding can be attributed to the training received from higher institutions of learning. Consequently, adoption of improved agricultural technologies is still very limited among. This is because smallholder farmers sometimes don't see the business sense in some of these technologies. Agricultural and agribusiness extension as a single combined program offered by higher institutions of learning in Africa can be the answer to challenges facing agricultural extension.

Keywords: Agricultural extension, Agribusiness extension, Agronomic Techniques, Agronomic knowledge, Extension workers, Change agents.

I. INTRODUCTION

Strengthening agricultural extension is a recommendation that cuts across almost all agricultural-related interventions from time immemorial. It is sad that the same recommendation still attracts significant attention in today's interventions targeting agriculture and related sub-sectors. It seems no one has bothered to find out why the same recommendations that existed before the current agricultural practitioners were born is still being pushed for.

One may argue that those who extended agricultural knowledge in the olden days lacked the skills, and perhaps had very limited exposure to agricultural technologies compared to the current agriculture extension workers. Africa in particular has seen enormous failures in the adoption of agricultural technologies over time. The same problem still exists in the current agricultural space. Unfortunately, the same recommendation, "strengthen agricultural extension" still exists. What if the problem rotates around the content that agriculture extension workers are taught?

Danso-Abbeam *et al.* (2018) define agricultural extension as a system that ought to facilitate farmers, their organizations and other market actors to information and technologies; knowledge, interaction with research institutions, education, agribusiness; and helping them to develop managerial and organisational skills. Syngenta (2022) defines agricultural extension as a process through which farmers in developing

countries are given knowledge about agronomic practices and skills to improve their productivity, food security and livelihoods. The two definitions show a very great distinction in the understanding of agricultural extension among agricultural practitioners.

The definition from Syngenta may not reflect what academicians mean by the term agricultural extension. However, this definition was chosen for this brief communication because in the real practical world, agricultural extension offered by government and non-governmental organisations focuses on transferring and delivering knowledge about agronomic techniques and practices. This statement is based on my personal experience in the agricultural extension arena as well as what I have observed in the rural communities as I grew up. Agricultural extension in most of rural communities is more like a synonym for good agronomic practices.

II. SUBJECT AND METHOD

This brief communication does not in any way belittle or undermine the potential and achievements of agricultural extension in Africa, rather it portrays the author's perspective and thoughts about agricultural extension. I acknowledge that the current understanding and implementation of agricultural extension programs still plays a great role in improving smallholder productivity and ensuring food security. This is in consideration that agricultural extension tends to primarily focus on transferring agronomic knowledge and techniques to smallholder farmers. This is actually exacerbated by the numerous grain processing companies across Africa. These companies have greatly invested in the so-called "agricultural extension" (offering agronomic knowledge to smallholder farmers) while maintaining themselves as the market for the produce from the trained farmers.

Where does the problem come from?

The perpetuation of the contrary understanding of agricultural extension even among agricultural extension workers can be attributed to the training received from higher institutions of learning. The curriculum for agricultural extension students largely focuses on crop and animal husbandry. Other areas emphasized include group dynamics, gender issues, community engagement, farm productivity improvement, climate change and adult education techniques.

Sharing knowledge about agronomic practices is not bad, but a question that should be addressed is what next after

production or after improving productivity? Are farmers able to answer this question on their own without any intermediaries? Can they take further steps to convert the improved farm productivity into monetary terms? Do they know how to do it and who to involve?

Due to the different understanding of agricultural extension, the adoption of improved agricultural technologies is still very limited among smallholder farmers in Africa. This can be attributed to the fact that smallholder farmers sometimes don't see the business sense in some of these technologies. This is not because they are dumb but because they have not been taught or given this information.

We may not have to blame agricultural extension workers because they were equally not trained about agribusiness. Their minds are stuck on helping farmers improve on-farm productivity, and when this is achieved, then they deem themselves successful. There's a new notion nowadays, "market-led agriculture" where farmers have to secure the market first before actual production begins. Does the current understanding and dissemination of agricultural knowledge to smallholder farmers rhyme with this notion?

What has the problem resulted to?

There is a tendency for smallholders to form groups and associations to benefit from projects from government and non-governmental organizations. When the projects come to an end, the groups are disbanded because every member would have gotten their share of the project. These are short-term gains for the smallholders and a waste of money for the donors who keep hoping that the initially established groups will remain in operation for years.

Some organizations go the extra mile and construct storage and processing facilities for farmer groups. These are abandoned as soon as the donors and lead organizations drive away from the farming communities. Shamefully, some farmer groups tend to call donor organizations to repair a leaking roof or a faulty door. Can a farmer group that understand the importance of a storage facility fail to buy a single iron sheet to cover a leaking roof?

III. RECOMMENDATION FOR CONSIDERATION

Agricultural and agribusiness extension as a single combined program offered by higher institutions of learning in Africa can be the answer to all the questions posed. Equipping agricultural change agents with knowledge on both agricultural production (crop and animal husbandry) and agribusiness management can greatly influence the way they extend knowledge to smallholder farmers and the quality of advice they offer. Explaining the business case of agricultural technologies will not only focus on the productivity aspect but also the business and monetary aspect. To the best of my conviction, this can rapidly boost adoption of agricultural technologies but also equip smallholders with the capabilities to actively participate in marketing of their produce without over reliance on intermediaries.

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Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest

No conflicts of interest have been identified for this communication.

Ethical approval

This study does not require ethical approval.

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