

Farmer Led Development and Mentoring

An Overview of Achievements in the Free State And A Way Forward

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Overview of Achievements

Beginnings

There is ample experience in the developing world that farmers learn best from other farmers. Agricultural extension officers rarely have adequate experience of practical farming and often want to dictate products and practices when advising the new farmer.

In South Africa the farmer led approach was put to the test in the Free State between October 1999 and April 2001 in the form of a pilot programme. This was carried out by Mngcunube Development Services on behalf of DLA and DoA with EU funding. Over 40 land reform 'beneficiary projects' were supported and the results have mainly been very positive. A further experience, and one which few South African would have expected, is that historically privileged white farmers and previously oppressed black groups have found common ground. There has been notable change in human relations.

The relative success attained suggests that emerging farmers in South Africa, all of them black and many poor with little experience of independently operating a farming enterprise, are not different to their Latin American or Asian counterparts. In fact the programme in the Free State saw a thoughtful blending of international practice and experience with South African realities.

The case study found several factors that contributed to the relatively high success level of the project:

- Adherence to the principles and values of farmer led development and extension
- Adherence to sound mentoring practice
- A facilitative approach to learning and development
- Sound management

What Actually Resulted

The following characterises the situation.

By way of illustrating how bad the position of some enterprises was, the case of a project in Koppies suffices.

- A group of 167 members acquired a going concern consisting of broiler production facilities, a poultry abattoir, a dairy enterprise and irrigated lands. All the farm machinery was in good order and the milk quota was operative. Careful preparation for support after hand over had been made. The planned support involved DoA, the local bank, a local accountant, the Department of Water Affairs and the dairy co-operative. By August 1999 only 14 out of the original herd of 80 dairy cows were alive and these were in very poor condition. Broiler production and irrigation had ceased. Farm machinery was in disrepair and the milk and poultry markets had been lost. The decision was taken that large, deeply troubled projects such as this could not be handled under the pilot mentorship project and it was left to its own devices. Three others suffered the same fate.

By contrast the success stories are characterised by the following selected cases.

- In 1998 a group near Theunissen acquired 135 hectares at a cost of R200 000 and was engaged mainly in poultry (broiler) production. The group was however divided by the failure of expected a capital grant to materialise, and by the tension between those who were active and those who were not but still expected to share in any benefits arising. There were as a result only five active members left by January 2000. By March 2001 three poultry houses were completed and full production was in progress. Bookkeeping was practised reliably and accurately and profits generated. For the financial year ending February 2001 the group made a net profit of R 16,000 compared to significant losses in the previous year. This was achieved without any additional funding.
- A group near Theunissen had hired 400 hectares of municipal land for crop production and in 1999 acquired a further 218 ha through DLA grants. The group had borrowed R119 000 for equipment and R 80 000 as a production loan from the Land Bank and payments were overdue. Difficulties had resulted in the group being split between the 'haves' and the 'have nots'. The former commenced to plant crops for their own account. By March 2001 four members of the group rented all the land and equipment from the remaining members and had leased additional municipal land. Both the original farm and the municipal land are in full scale commercial production. The Land Bank repayments are in order. The group is 'on their own' and requires no mentor, although contact with Mngcunube is maintained. Two good crops have been produced in the last two seasons. About 200 hectares have been planted with yields of about 2.2 tonnes per hectare on a dryland basis. Gross income for 1999/2000 was about R 484 000. Similar results are expected for 2000/2001
- A group at Kroonstad had been operating a successful poultry business on hired land. In 1998 it acquired 168 ha at a cost of R 300 000. The group had 25 members. The attempt to move the broiler operation to the new farm ended in disaster for complex and murky reasons. In addition to grants for land acquisition the group had received grants from other sources in excess of R 200 000 and had taken a Land Bank loan for R 40 000. Additional donor money had vanished and the Land Bank had not been repaid - although the Chairperson had told the group that he had done this and had been given group funds to do so. By October 1999 the group had in effect abandoned production and had leased the property to the Dikgomo Trust. By March 2001 organisational health has been fully restored and 12 committed individuals remained active. Planned training in bookkeeping, broiler production, farming skills and marketing has been completed. Unproductive assets

had been sold and the income used to reduce debt, Full poultry production is in place and markets have been developed to absorb all production. Books are kept in good order and the Land Bank loan repayments are made as scheduled. For the financial year ending February 2001 the group made a net profit of R 6,000 compared to a loss of over R 100 000 in the previous year. This was achieved without any additional funding and in the face of repayment of significant debt to the Land bank.

- A group of 20 women from the commonage at Bothaville was engaged selling chicken pieces to raise funds for poultry production. They then progressed from reselling of bought chicken pieces to production of broilers. The group negotiated access to a shed for broiler production and purchased equipment with their own resources. Complete financial records are kept, and these show that for the financial year ending February 2001 the group made a net profit of R21,000 compared to zero production and income in the previous year. Income is allocated from profits to members on a sustainable basis. Three new poultry houses have been built and equipped with a CPF-SP grant and come into production in mid March 2001: full production was achieved in the previous shed and will be expanded in the new sheds.

There are a number of enterprises somewhere in between the successful cases and the disaster case mentioned here. Most show signs of positive change, while some stagnate. Some came into the FLD&M programme later than others did and it is too early to assess their future status.

The Approach Taken

Farmer Led Development and Extension - Mentoring

Mngcunube brought to the project an over-riding view that a significant rural middle class of black and white farmers was a crucial ingredient in reaching for peace, harmony, non-racism and democratisation in South Africa. Mngcunube's approach therefore embraced not only capacitation of land reform beneficiaries but also effective and human interaction between them and white farmers, initially in a mentoring relationship. (It should be noted that mentoring is not a one way relationship in which experienced farmers guide new farmers. Experienced farmers have a direct self interest in having successful new neighbours as do rural farming communities and businesses in general).

The other factor promoting the use of a mentoring approach was the recognition that land acquisition will seldom of itself deliver new and effective farmers and that a few training courses - no matter how relevant and useful - do not of themselves equip an emergent farmer to farm profitably and sustainably. Farming is a high-risk enterprise, even at modest scale. Consistent positive return to effort requires a wide range of agricultural, business, human relations and financial skills. While some of these can be learned, there is an underpinning level of know-how that is best learned by sharing with those who have the know-how based on years of experience. In the words of Mngcunube it is imperative to "walk the road together", with the implication that the road is a long one.

The principles that militate for a mentoring approach are rooted in the growing international practice and experience of FLD&E, which, in addition to mentoring, embraces Farmer Field Schools. Both demand on-site, in-progress learning throughout the production cycle and through a number of production cycles. The FLD&E approach places high value on farming skills as opposed to theoretical skills. It does not undervalue technical research and knowledge

but recognises that they form only part of successful farming. The approach also promotes the use of existing skills and strengths rather than their replacement. It seeks to add by opening awareness of options that can meet the real possibilities of emerging farmers in their actual settings without limiting their potential to change the setting in which they are at the time. An important dimension in this regard is keen appreciation by the mentor/ extension worker of what blockages, apart from technical or supply-side, the emergent farmer experiences. For example low literacy and numeracy skills, lack of access to communication infrastructure, lack of experience in operating a small or medium or large agricultural enterprise, racism and other forms of marginalisation. Inherent in this dimension is that the mentor/extension worker be readily available to the emergent farmer - close understanding and appropriate support come from frequent and easy contact rather than occasional training days or monthly trouble shooting meetings.

Sustainability

Large investments of public funds in land and capital can be justified only if returns are positive and can be maintained. Conversely 'beneficiaries' whose aspirations are dashed by failed or unsustainable enterprises contribute to perceptions in some quarters that land reform and growth of a successful black farming sector are unrealistic political goals. Sustainability provides further impetus for mentoring and 'walking the road' together.

The principle of sustainability also saw Mngcunube seek to engage with stakeholders other than mentors. These included the DoA, a range of private sector agricultural operations, lending institutions and local government. The perspective of Mngcunube was that at some point the support of specialist consultants would be redundant and that beneficiary groups would need by then to have formed their own effective relations with these other stakeholders and service/support agents.

Facilitation: Learning and Discovery of Options

Mngcunube adopted an approach based on facilitation. That is, engagement and relations were on the basis that the groups wished to find ways of changing and improving their circumstances and the role of the consultant is to assist them in doing so. By implication this means that the approach was not that of resource provider or 'teacher'. A sound understanding of facilitation and of the demanding skills needed to apply it properly lie at the heart of capacity building. This is not to say that they any skills or knowledge held by the consultants or mentors, and needed by the beneficiaries, are withheld in the name of the principles of good facilitation practice. It does mean that the consultant has to carefully separate different roles and to ensure that the one does not contradict the other. Coupled with FLD&E/mentoring, the capacity building inherent in a facilitative approach promotes sustainability.

Sound Practice

The consultants sought to apply the above mentioned values and principles as well as general good practice (efficiency and effectiveness) in a combination of ways. Mngcunube facilitators are fluent in South Sotho, English and Afrikaans and thus able to relate easily to all stakeholders. The mentors and facilitators established with their client groups a clear and regular schedule for personal interactions and held meticulously to these. This practice built confidence in the reliability of the consultants, and that they were there to 'walk the road' and not just to do a job. Agreements for engagement of mentors were set up. These specify in detail their roles, responsibilities, skills, qualities, criteria for appointment and management and accountability settings. Selection of mentors involved scanning the local farmers union and screening by the beneficiary group. The group completes monthly evaluation reports and in the

event of unsatisfactory support the mentor can be replaced. The mentors received informal guidance from the consultants on facilitation and, together with the Mngcunube facilitators, given training in facilitation skills. Mentors receive a stipend which, although it does little more than cover their costs, helps ensure that there is a basis for accountability. Relations have been built with a wide range of private sector stakeholders and with the Land Bank. Mngcunube used 'standard operating procedures' to improve efficiency

Mentoring In Action

In August 2000 there were four mentors in the projects covered by the case study. Several mentors covered two to four projects each and several of the new/additional projects were at a stage before introduction of a mentor was needed. By March 2001 there were seven mentors for the projects covered by the case study. In addition Mngcunube deployed three associates to work full time on the 41 projects.

Mentors enter into detailed agreements specifying their roles and responsibilities, as well as the basis for their appointment and their management and accountability.

Some key features are:

- Mentors have 10 or more years' practical experience of proven success in commercial farming with good standing in the local community. Skills must include marketing, production, and economic and financial management. They are required to be members of local farming organisations and have effective relations with government, the private sector and lending institutions.
- In addition to spending a minimum stipulated time per month with groups, mentors are selected on the basis of qualities such as patience, empathy, communication and language skills, and conscious engagement in joint learning. Their role is defined as one that diminishes as the group develops its own skills and relationships.
- In addition to direct sharing of skills and knowledge of farming, the mentors are expected to forge relationships between the groups and all facets of the broader agricultural community such as organised agriculture, lending bodies, suppliers and marketing bodies.

The way in which mentors roles are carried out are so diverse in practice that no simple summary can be applied. There have been many instances where there has been clear and direct learning and gains by beneficiary groups arising directly from their access to a mentor.

Beneficiary groups were independently asked to relate, in confidence, what they thought of the approach and inputs of mentors and Mngcunube. There was universal appreciation of what had been done, on skills and opportunities acquired relationships and opportunities opened, for retrieval of financial crises and rescheduling of loans, and other forms of practical support. Such appreciation is perhaps predictable in the case of groups in crisis when good services have been provided. Importantly, the groups responded as positively on the way the mentors and Mngcunube worked, which reflects positively on the principled approach taken and on the facilitative approach, with positive implications for the objective of sustainability.

Comments included: 'now we feel we can learn'; 'they are patient'; 'they lift us up by how they work'; 'we can rely on them to keep their word'; 'they ask us and put options and do not tell us what to do'; 'now that we keep our books we can see profit and this encourages us'; 'there is less conflict'; 'the mentor fulfils our wishes like a loving human being does with another'; 'at first there was nothing then we understood how putting one foot in front of the other leads to where you can see the road we want to walk on'; and much more in the same vein.

Degree of Success of the Project's Approach

It is clear that most projects have improved their situation - in some cases to a significant extent. It is also true that some have not progressed and a few have in fact regressed. The Land Bank in the northern Free State, where the project was focused, reports that none of their land reform beneficiary clients that have been connected with the FLD&M project are subject to foreclosure. By contrast the Bank's office for the southern Free State reports that 30% of land reform beneficiary clients have been handed over and that a further 50% are vulnerable to foreclosure.

It is fair to infer that the reason for improvement has been the FLD&E/mentoring approach. The basis for this inference is that almost nothing else has been brought to bear on the groups by way of support and advice throughout the 18 months of the project's life. The key lesson is that the nature of support provided can reasonably be assumed to be the key success factor. In summary this was:

- Farmers learn more easily from other farmers
- Training and other inputs can be very important but they cannot replace the need for a mentor to 'walk the road' with learning farmers
- An approach based on facilitation (helping others to achieve and learn what they want) is crucial
- The need for good management is as important here as in any other approach
- Sustainability is enhanced by taking the above approach

There were other success factors specific to the project in question. One is that the project, although operated by a firm of consultants, was based on values, vision, principles and levels of commitment more normally associated with the non-profit sector.

Even greater success might have been achieved but for some local factors. One was the unplanned expansion in the number of projects covered from 20 to 41 without any addition to the original budget. This was done in response to numerous unsolicited requests for support. While such requests are a testament to the good reputation of the FLD&E/mentorship project, the effect was to detract from the time and attention given to original projects. In part this also affected the time given to selection and support of mentors. The most profound influence however was that the very poor state of organisational and financial health of the projects that were inherited by Mngcunube.

Project Approach Compared to International Experience

Internationally, the literature shows that farmer led development is mostly concerned with attempts to overcome a supply led approach by government extension services and to facilitate the learning of new technology. The literature also depicts FLD&E taking place where there existing farmers have a tradition of being farmers – the issue being how FLD&E can improve their food security, sustainability and income.

The South African setting is strikingly different. Emergent farmers generally have little experience of managing a farm at the enterprise level. Their expectations generally go beyond matters of food security and basic income to more ambitious levels. New technology, while perhaps not fully understood or affordable, is not outside their aspirations. In South Africa, emergent farmers are (for now at least) all group owners of land, which is not the case elsewhere. The state extension services do however tend to share the international pattern of being supply led. Finally and most vividly, the farmer-leaders in countries in Asia and Latin America are those with special attention drawn from their peers. In South Africa, the leaders

used in the mentoring project come from a completely different group to the emergent farmers themselves.

Given these differences it is striking that FLD&E/mentoring has worked in South Africa with no modification to its core principles and values.

The Group Factor

Compared to other countries, the South African setting is unique in that there were factors that resulted in new farmers operating with very few exceptions on the basis of group ownership of land (or leased rights to land). The setting of powerful local elites and landlords reported from other countries is generally absent – although powerful people in the South African groups did emerge and often proved a difficult influence.

The popular wisdom (with hindsight) is that it was a mistake to take the 'group route'. The mentorship project clearly suffered in that many months (and in some cases the whole project period) were spent on problems of group dynamics and decision making rather than on entering into successful production. A differing perspective on the group factor is that it was the failure to provide appropriate pre-planning and support to groups that resulted in there being such severe problems.

The project has shown that it is possible to work successfully with groups. The facilitative approach taken was central in this regard. Toward the end of the project when experience had gelled Mngcunube developed guidelines and principles on good and effective practice for engagement with groups.

A Way Forward

Land reform cannot succeed if emergent farmers do not receive appropriate support. Acquisition of land is but a first step on the road to success. The positive Free State experience with FLD&M strongly suggests that it is the most appropriate form of support and that it should be applied more widely. The approach is relatively inexpensive and results can be achieved within about three years – or less in some cases. Clearly the cost of numerous failed land reform initiatives is higher than the cost of any support system. Government should consider how it applies its resources, including donor funds, to help apply sound FLD&M practice more widely.

There is however a risk that mentoring can be done badly. As demonstrated in the Free State it requires careful design based on principles and values, coupled with good management. This can be developed into a form that complies with SAQA requirements and standards. If so, it will also create a basis for financing through access to SETA funds which will assist with the sustainable spread of FLD&M.

Agricultural extension workers are to some extent supplanted by mentors and facilitators under FLD&M. This does not imply that there is no place for their specific skills. A positive development in 2001 was the inclusion of 'mentoring' in the strategy of the Department of Agriculture. In mid 2001 the new MEC announced that the Department would take over the FLD&M approach. This move to mainstream the process is very encouraging and the ability of the Department to lead and manage the approach, based on learnings from the pilot project will prove crucial.