

Using information to empower farmer based organisations in the Kwahu North district of Ghana

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Abstract

The Presbyterian University College, Ghana (PUCG) a private university with three campuses all located in rural areas of Ghana, has an outreach centre which has started to disseminate agricultural information to provide knowledge to farmers and farmer based organisations in the Kwahu North district. This District often referred to as the bread basket of Ghana has tremendous potential to contribute significantly to the improvement and well-being of the Ghanaian economy through improved agricultural productivity and rural development. However a major factor militating against this vast agricultural district is the inaccessibility of the area to the rest of the country due to limited physical access resulting in the unavailability of scientific information and technical knowledge to these farmers. Forms of communication such as radio, internet, and telephones are virtually unavailable thus making it difficult to get relevant and up to date information to farmers in this vast area. This paper discusses efforts being made by the university to empower farmers by providing them with information and knowledge on various aspects of agricultural development. Information is a vital component in the agricultural production process but its value is often underestimated and overlooked. Using training as a medium of information dissemination, the university is able to provide farmers with information on production processes, land acquisition and credit facilities among others. Farmers have demonstrated that information does have a positive impact on production and development resulting in a changed mindset. Due to new knowledge acquired as a result of the provision of information, farmers are now poised to go into commercial farming using modern methods and are now willing to access national and international markets.

Introduction

Agriculture is undeniably the largest economic sector in Ghana providing over 51% of its inhabitants with employment with a greater number of these entities located in the rural areas (García, 2006). The Kwahu North district, one of Ghana's large agricultural districts is often described as the bread basket of the country. This is due to its potential to contribute significantly to the improvement of the well-being of Ghanaians through improved agricultural productivity and rural development (<http://apdadp.org>: February 2010). In spite of these enormous advantages, the area has several challenges which militate against its improvement. For example the area has limited physical access being virtually a peninsula cut off on three sides by the Volta Lake and on the fourth by lack of connecting roads to the outside world (<http://apdadp.org> : February 2010) Though a potential agricultural region, it lacks good communication outlets such as radio, internet facilities and reliable telephone networks. Valuable agricultural information, extension support and knowledge workers are also unavailable. Farmers therefore lack the much needed support they require from such experts to improve on their agricultural output.

Borisova (2004) in a paper on the management of strategic information asserted that most rural communities are dependent on agriculture and related enterprises for their livelihoods, and they constantly need up-to-date information on new agricultural processes and farming methods, equipment and supplies, market prices and access to credit facilities. The unavailability of such information makes it difficult for rural farmers to adopt new methods of production to expand their farms. There is therefore the need to improve on information provision in all areas of agriculture for small time rural

farmers so that knowledge produced by farmers or documented in published literature can be used effectively.

Methodology

The Presbyterian University College, a private university located in the Kwahu district has recognised the lack of agricultural information to farmers in districts around its catchment area as a major factor militating against the rapid expansion of production. The area does not have developed forms of communication such as internet facilities, telephone and very limited radio coverage. Agricultural extension officers are limited to only the major towns within the area, thus leaving the small time farmer to fend for themselves. Libraries and information centres are also unavailable. The university therefore decided to set up an agricultural support centre in the Kwahu North district, away from its headquarters in the east but under the direction of its outreach centre located at the headquarters. The main aim of setting up this centre was to provide farmers with information and extension services and also to help train the youth in modern methods of agricultural production to enable them to improve on their production methods and eventually on their livelihoods. Farmers in this district work hard to produce food for the Ghanaian population. It is evident that they could produce more if they had the relevant information that would enable them to expand their farms.

To achieve these aims, the centre identified twelve Farmer Based organisations (FBO) to work with. These FBO's have a total of 529 individual farmers who the centre believed could be empowered through the provision of up to date information on agriculture in order to improve on their farming practices. Ages of farmers selected ranged between 19 years and 66years with 49 % of them being females. Over 60.7% of the farmers have never been to school and only 4.3% have high school and technical education.

An information needs analysis was conducted to enable the centre to identify the kind and type of information that would be needed by each farmer to enable it to develop appropriate information modules for each farmer. Questions asked included farm acreage land size, yield, crop types and methods of production. In addition farmers were asked about their storage methods, the kind of agro chemicals that were being used, market outlets available and their income levels.

Results of the study

Results indicated that farmers were eager to be provided with relevant and up to date information on production practices, access to credit facilities, methods of storage and accessible markets among others. The analysis also reported that 100% of the farmers interviewed were engaged in subsistence farming, in crops such as yams, pepper, cassava, and cowpeas which meant that information to be given to them had to lay emphasis on various aspects of these crops.

Due to the low level of literacy of many of these farmers, (60.7%) the centre could not disseminate published information directly to them but rather used innovative methods of information dissemination to enable them benefit from this exercise.

These methods included face to face interactions using local languages (ewe and twi), interviews and focus group discussions as well as short term training sessions, gathering and sharing of indigenous knowledge through experience sharing. In the face to face interactions, farmers were able to discuss their problems with the facilitators who were then able to identify the most suitable form of information to provide. Even though a greater number of farmers could neither read nor write, the facilitators realised that there was at least one literate person in each group who would be able to translate the required published information to them. As a result a module was compiled on production processes, inexpensive but effective storage methods and on several aspects of agriculture which was given to each group. Role plays and demonstrations using scientific concepts were also introduced to the farmers in the local languages.

Impact of results

The efforts of the outreach centre did not go down the drain as the provision of up to date and repackaged agricultural information had a positive impact on the farmers. Since the various modules of information had specially been compiled to suit individual needs, farmers were able to apply the various concepts on a personal level. Subsequent visits to the farmers indicated that they had started regarding their farms in a businesslike manner and some had developed business plans for their crops such as maize, yam, pepper and groundnuts. They plan to use the business plans to access micro credit that would enable them to expand their farms.

Even though still too early to assess, it is expected that with the application of improved methods, yield would also increase. Some farmers are also beginning to explore other ways of marketing their products such that they can get higher incomes. Indeed some ambitious farmers are beginning to explore the possibility of penetrating national and international markets. At the end of six weeks of knowledge enhancement and skills development, many of the farmers (over 90%) were ready to adopt improved production and post harvest handling technologies, develop better marketing strategies and thereby boost quality production of their crops.

Challenges

The Kwahu North district is an enormous agricultural area with the potential to support various crops in Ghana. However faced with so many difficulties and challenges, it appears to be lagging behind many districts in Ghana with poor and inadequate infrastructure. Indeed it is believed that the modest effort of the PUCG may be inconsequential as farmers so far empowered through the provision of information form only a small percentage of total farmers in the whole of the district. However, it is recommended that other nongovernmental and governmental organisations should also take up the challenge of providing information to farmers and begin to pay attention to some of these challenges. Attention should be paid to this area in terms of policy direction on the provision of amenities such as water, electricity and communication networks. Radio communication may be another effective method of disseminating information and it is recommended that government takes a look at the possibility of setting up several community radio stations in strategic areas with the purpose of providing farmers with up to date information on agriculture and rural development. Also agricultural information centres may prove to be successful if they are sited near farmer based organisations and in market centres. This will ensure that farmers and buyers alike may be able to seek help from these information centres and agricultural experts on market days.

One major factor which needs immediate attention is the difficulty in accessing markets due to the poor telecommunication/road network throughout the district. Addressing this problem could prove to be a reason for the expansion of farm size by farmers since it would expose them to larger markets and easier for them to sell their products. It would also ensure that in the absence of reliable telecommunication and internet services, even hard copies of published material may be sent there in a timely manner.

Conclusion

The rural urban divide manifests itself in several ways that need to be bridged. Bridging this gap in itself is not the problem for governments to handle, but rather the issue of appropriate information provision and management which is lacking in many rural communities. In the field of agriculture one could not but agree with Borisova (undated) that successful planning in agricultural enterprises requires information. The quality of a decision therefore depends greatly on an accurate understanding of the surrounding circumstances and on the knowledge of available alternatives. The better the information, the better the resulting decision. The Kwahu North district has a dearth of information which if not solved will continue to affect the quality of decisions being taken by people in authority. Emphasis should begin to be placed on information management at all levels ie from the scientist to the policy maker to the farmer. This study by PUCG shows that the provision of information has the capacity to empower the recipient, in this case the farmer and aids in rural development and he

improvement of livelihoods. It is recommended that very effort should be made to replicate this project in other rural areas in Ghana by well endowed Non Governmental and Government organisations.

References

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