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A review of a public private extension partnership for small-scale sugarcane farmers in South Africa

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Context

With an aggressive initiative of land reform in South Africa (SA) where the national government requires that 30% of titled farmland is to be in the hands of black farmers by 2014, there are a growing number of new generation farmers who require extensive support in the basic practices of field husbandry.

In 1994 industry de-regulation forced reform and the SA Department of Agriculture and Environment affairs accept the responsibility to manage it. From 1996, the South African Sugar industry has been engaged in a public private partnership with the Kwa-Zulu Natal Department of Agriculture and Environment Affairs (DAEA) to provide extension services. This service, 'The Joint Venture' (JV) is provided to some 45 000 small-scale farmers who produce up to 15% of the national production off 20% of the land under sugarcane in South Africa.

Apart from adapting and applying practices to maximise the benefits of research and technologies that have been developed to ensure sustainable farming businesses, the extension workers are further faced with a continuous decline in the production levels of small-scale farmers. Sugarcane farmers are no exception to this and their competitiveness is vital to a buoyant and motivated extension service.

Objectives

This review paper outlines the process that was followed and identifies what would be done differently if the process of forming partnerships were to begin again, and will further outline some of the international experiences in ventures and partnerships of this nature.

Description of the Initiative

To providing an appropriate service, the first step aimed in identifying the need. The information gained showed very variable existing organisational structures at different levels:

- Autocratic/bureaucratic.
- Autonomy levels
- Accountability
- Clear division of responsibility.
- Appoint the relevant champion

A formal contractual agreement for the JV was signed and principally based on:

- Performance agreement
- Monitoring committee
- Staffing

Results and Impacts

Apart from analytic information on existing in organisational structures and JV establishments, other outcomes concerned:

- Training and support

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- Developed programmes of work.
- Established Research, Development and Evaluation (RD& E) committees
- Consolidated land resource
- A universally accepted success.
- Review report 2003: “The JV is pushing development”

The pressure on production levels is often as a result of many socio-economic factors and cannot be left to extension alone to address.

The differing corporate cultures remain a challenge and the current discussion concerns are on the consequence in privatising the service involved in the organisational restructuring.

To optimise resource utilisation, Public/Private partnerships must be set up because the collaboration and partner support are essential. The care for partnerships is strategic to ensure a mutually defined objective and ownership development.

Prospects

With 11 years of experience in the business of public private agricultural extension partnerships, invaluable experience has been gained that could be shared with others wishing to embark on a similar process. This partnership has had some successes through the challenges of two diverse organisational cultures working towards common goals, but has also learnt valuable lessons.

Establishing a partnership to deliver a service with the required service level agreements in place was a necessary step in the right direction in 1996, but it is evident that the transformation has been at a pace far beyond expectation which has created a new set of ideals for achievement, including the introduction of other key role players in future arrangements.

There is no quick route to experience which a quality is lacking in many new entrants into the farming business who may be first generation farmers.

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