

COMPARING A MARKETING EXTENSION FUNCTION AMONG SMALL-SCALE FARMERS WITH A TYPICAL EXTENSION SYSTEM IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

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ABSTRACT

This paper compares an extension system offered by a marketing agency with services provided by the traditional extension system in Trinidad and Tobago. Both are supported by the State and underscore a growing paradigm shift in which agencies other than a ministry or department of agriculture provide extension support. Two agencies were the subject of this analysis: the National Agricultural and Marketing Development Corporation (NAMDEVCO) and the Ministry of Food Production, Lands and Marine Affairs (MFPLMA). NAMDEVCO began its interaction with the farming community through a farmer certification programme in 2000. The MFPLMA has a long-standing extension link with farmers. The investigation confirmed the efficacy of these

services from the clients' viewpoint, interviewing a random sample of 60 farmers who exclusively use one of the services. It assessed the level of participation in relation to personal characteristics, life situation factors, institutional identity, financial factors and personal preferences for learning in an extension environment. The study used quantitative questions on a four-point Likert scale, measuring farmers' agreement levels with statements and open-ended and closed questions about farmers' personal characteristics. Most of the sample farmers were male, married and earn income primarily from agricultural production. Both sets of producers needed extension services for improving incomes and farm practices and were desirous of seeing immediate (rather than delayed) results. The NAMDEVCO extension service was

more appreciated than the typical system with regard to improving farm practices and decision-making and quality of service provided. The study recommends an integration of specialist services alongside more traditional systems.

KEY WORDS: *PARADIGM SHIFT, LEARNING, IMMEDIATE RESULTS*

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INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES

This study compares an extension service provided by a marketing agency with the traditional extension system in Trinidad and Tobago. Both services are State owned and demonstrate an increasing paradigm shift in which agencies other than ministries or departments of agriculture provide advisory and extension services.

Trinidad and Tobago has the typical extension system found in many developing countries with a British colonial history. The State constructs and manages the system, which offers advisory and regulatory services to farmers. Most farmers are categorised as small-scale farmers who cultivate small parcels of land (less than 15 ha). Most have less than 5 ha of land. The most recent census (2004) shows that 53% of male and 33% of female landholders respectively, occupy 4.94–12.35 ha (CSO, 2005). The census also indicates a decline of 37% in the number of agricultural producers since the previous census in 1982 (CSO, 1986). Small-scale farmers grow a variety of food crops mainly for local consumption. Attempts to export these commodities have not been very successful. There have been sporadic volumes of specially selected crops (e.g., pumpkins and hot peppers) exported to tourist markets elsewhere in the Caribbean and niche markets in North America. The State is concerned that the country imports large quantities of staples, meat and processed food, which threatens long and short-term food

security. There have been attempts to encourage farmers to produce staples, such as rice and sweet potatoes, to replace imported cereal products.

The extension services division has a hierarchical structure leading down to the frontline extension agents who work with farmers. A chief extension officer or director of extension takes responsibility for extension matters. The main aim of such an extension unit is to provide advisory services in the best possible manner using the latest communication methodologies. The service is guided by extension policy derived from national policy priorities (in some instances perhaps, political expediency), farmer-driven mandates, and food and environmental security paradigms.

There is much debate regarding the ability of a predominantly State-run extension system to deliver its mandate. It is commonly believed that expectations of the extension agent are too multifaceted for meaningful impact. The cost is becoming prohibitive and the research efforts are severely limited. Consequently, research must settle for unacceptable compromise in the fast-changing pace of cutting-edge agricultural scientific discovery and development (Lindner and Dolly, 2008).

The extension system faces many challenges that make it difficult to conduct high-impact extension for its clients. There is a shortage of extension officers which is reflected in the high

ratio of farmers to extension agents: an average of 568 farmers to one extension officer in an environment where there are limited support facilities with which to conduct extension work (Kissoonsingh, 2005). There is a need for improved delivery of decision-support information to help extension agents and their clients to be competitive on the world market.

Marketing extension systems have begun to assume importance worldwide. Farmers are increasingly perceiving that marketing rather than production is the major constraint to enhancing farm incomes (Wandschneider and Kim Yen, 2009). There is the view that the typical extension system tends to transfer production technologies, without any emphasis on or follow-up for marketing. New international trading arrangements dictated by the World Trade Organization (WTO) make these considerations imperative. Markets have become very sophisticated and farmers need to know about marketing in a global economy. Extension officers must be in a position to assist their clients by providing assistance with farm management, post-harvest handling, agri-business, special marketing skills and new demands in global retail sectors (Shephard, 2011).

The agricultural census of 2004 (CSO, 2005) indicated that most farmers received marketing information from other farmers. At that time, NAMDEVCO was the third most popular source of information ahead of State agencies and the



University/CARDI². The latter has the research and development mandate for the region. The farmers cited the following problems in receiving market information in order of popularity: sourcing information, appropriateness of information, frequency of information and understanding the information provided. Another aspect of the census enquiry revealed that, when it came to marketing agricultural products, farmers encountered the following problems in order of popularity: loss of markets, high cost of transportation, post-harvest losses, low prices and lack of market space. A competent extension service that offers marketing advice can assist in resolving marketing impediments.

It is in this context that considerations are given to new specialist extension organisations to assist in the delivery of more focused services to clients. If these services are successful, it would ease the strain on the typical system and contribute to a better advisory system for farmers and other clients. The work reported here therefore sought to investigate and compare a new service provider in Trinidad and Tobago – the National Agricultural Marketing and Development Corporation (NAMDEVCO). NAMDEVCO has begun to provide a marketing extension system to a select number of certified farmers, which it serves in the same area where the State extension system operates. The study was conducted to assess the efficacy of the NAMDEVCO extension service and the

longstanding service of the Ministry of Food Production, Lands and Marine Affairs (MFPLMA) in Trinidad and Tobago.

MATERIALS, METHODS AND DATA SOURCES

A random sample of 60 farmers who exclusively used one of the two services provided by either NAMDEVCO or MFPLA in the same geographic district, was selected. The study assessed level of participation in relation to personal characteristics, life situation factors, institutional identity, financial factors and personal preferences, using a questionnaire that provided quantitative answers based on a four-point Likert scale response template. The scale measured farmers' levels of agreement with statements and open-ended and closed questions about farmers' personal characteristics. It patterned this approach on a previous study of Goff (2008). Goff used this approach to study differences between completers and non-completers of a farmer field school methodology in similar areas to where NAMDEVCO operates its marketing extension system.

SPSS (version 16) was used to compute descriptive frequencies, compare means and for chi-square analysis. The descriptive statistics provided means for selected demographics, other appropriate responses and means of agreement, which led to an understanding of respective clients' preferences for each service provider. Means for agreement on the four-point Likert scale were

calculated in four categories: personal factors, life-situation factors, financial factors and institutional factors. The participants responded to statements in relation to these factors. Chi squares (at 5% significance level) showed the significant relationships between these mean scores of agreement on statements about each service provider (MFPLMA or NAMDEVCO).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

NAMDEVCO is bringing the practice of marketing extension to the forefront. Key to this activity is registering and monitoring a cadre of certified farmers who must meet certain production technology criteria in order to represent the brand of marketing that NAMDEVCO offers. There were 880 farmers in the certification programme at the time of this study (September 2011). Qualified field officers provide specialist marketing extension services to farmers. The corporation also offers a National Agricultural Marketing Information System (NAMIS), which provides a range of marketing intelligence for all buyers and consumers in Trinidad and Tobago.

Farmer demographics

The farmers in the study who use either of the

² Caribbean Agricultural Research and Development Institute.



services of the MFPLMA and NAMDEVCO were citizens aged over 45 years. However, NAMDEVCO also appears to attract younger farmers in the age group 19–29 years. Most farmers were males and they cultivated smallholdings of less than 2 ha. Most (70%) of the samples of both sets of clients were married. This was a higher percentage than the national average (56%) in the 2004 census

All age groups agreed that they needed extension services. However, the youngest farmers in the sample (19–25 years) and the oldest farmers (>60 years) seem less receptive to the services. Both groups may have differing reasons. All age groups could use what they learned, valued the knowledge shared and enjoyed gaining new knowledge. Even so, the youngest age group (19–25) felt least able to apply what they learned and the age group 41–60 years valued new knowledge the most. Service providers must pay special attention to the different needs of the age groups they serve.

More of NAMDEVCO's farmers had received secondary education when compared with the national average of only 27% receiving secondary education in 2004 (CSO, 2005). However, the level of education did not affect farmers' engagement in marketing. All expressed confidence in being able to market their commodities. Yet owners of larger farms (>2 ha) were more affected by the challenges in marketing produce.

Life situation factors

Both populations of farmers agreed to work with one of the extension services for improving their income and were generally driven by a family member or friend to join the service. Both groups agreed that their real problems were not addressed by the extension services, but the MFPLMA farmers felt this more than the NAMDEVCO farmers.

Institutional factors

Farmers were generally satisfied with NAMDEVCO's service regarding meeting frequency, meeting location, meeting safety and meeting length. This was not the case with those farmers served by the MFPLMA.

The analysis further revealed that NAMDEVCO's clients agreed that its service could improve farm decision-making. The clients were agreeable to the topics NAMDEVCO addressed, the farm practices it promoted, the way it planned activities and the way it engaged with farmers' concerns. This was not the case with those clients served by the MFPLMA. Both sets of farmers still rely on the agricultural shops to obtain information about farming practices.

Farmers who used NAMDEVCO's services encouraged other farmers to do so, while the ministry's farmers did not encourage other farmers to join that organization's programmes. NAMDEVCO's farmers showed a greater

awareness of the benefits of NAMDEVCO's services than their counterparts who used the MFPLMA's services. Farmers approved of the services of the NAMIS offered by NAMDEVCO, for which there is no counterpart in the MFPLMA.

Personal preferences

There is an apparent need for farmers to improve their skills, and there exists demand for efficient and effective extension services. Farmers generally participated in these services to improve their enterprises rather than to support the officer³. Both populations of respondents agreed that these services had benefitted their operations. NAMDEVCO's farmers enjoyed learning new things, were willing to receive more information and advice in their operations, and were more able to apply what they learned from NAMDEVCO's services. This was not the case for clients of the MFPLMA.

Financial factors

Most (about 75%) of the farmers received their income from farming. This compared very well with

³ 'Supporting the officer' suggests that farmers think that saying 'yes' to the officer as an open demonstration of support might be an investment for some favour in the future. However, this was not the general motivation in this case.



the national average in 2004 of 58% (CSO, 2005). The farmers would try new methods that were found to be safer and they were generally concerned with the long-term productivity of their farms. Farmers would need guidance and support in the decisions they make when attempting to meet standards for international markets. They perceived the benefits of adding value to increase farm profits through engaging in the higher end of the value chain, but did not consider supermarket trading of strategic importance.

CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATION AND IMPLICATIONS

The study looked at parallel extension services offered by the MFPLMA and NAMDEVCO. Both services are important to clients and but there were varying levels of client acceptance and satisfaction. NAMDEVCO's extension service as a marketing agency was more appreciated than was the ministry's.

This suggests a role for specialist marketing services that can enhance farm practice while linking it to a focused marketing effort. However, in so doing it may be possible to integrate the two services in order to avoid duplication and to rationalise which aspects are better served by each organisation. The aging farming population needs attention.

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