

Farmer group Article

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN QUALITY OF FARMER GROUPS AND EFFECTIVENESS OF NAADS PROGRAMME AND OTHER RELATED FACTORS

The basic tenet of this article is to look at the use of farmer groups as intermediaries for developing farmers. Let us then, at the outset, define and explain the following key components of the title of this article – **farmer groups and effectiveness**.

Farmer groups are grassroots farmer institutions upon which the country's farming community can build strong local and national organisations and form networks that can help in fostering agricultural development through proactively demanding for farmers' rights. Such rights include the right to a share in national resource allocation and its accountability, the right to participate in decisions that affect the farming community (e. g. formulation of policies, design of projects and programmes and decision making regarding new innovations and initiatives). In the context of this article a farmer group encompasses all forms of farmer organisations - formal and informal, production and marketing farmer co-operatives and, farmers' Savings and Credit Co-operative Societies (SACCOs). They also include the newly founded Area Co-operative Enterprises (ACEs) associated with the Uganda Cooperative Alliance and the proposed Farmers' Group Associations under the Rural Development Strategy (RDS) of the Ministry Finance Planning and Economic Development. To be beneficial, farmer groups' participation should be proactive and not passive in local and national discussions and programmes. However, the majority of the farming community in Uganda (composed of smallholder farmers), suffers from lack of knowledge and capabilities which impinges on its participation and bargaining power in spheres that affect farmers' livelihoods. As a result, farmers do not know what to demand for, they are incapable of monitoring projects designed for their benefits, and cannot carry out value-for-money audits. Farmers are also weak in demanding what is due to them and rejecting goods and services imposed on them. These weaknesses derail farmers' development efforts and exclude them from the decision making process which influences the country's development path.

Internal governance of farmer groups may also be a challenge. Farmer institutions must show democratic governance in their leadership and transparency in financial management. They need proper physical and financial records and their interpretation. They need to look at farmer institutions as channels for enhancing their farming businesses and socio-economic development and not limited to social cohesion of members. These are challenges that government, donors and non-government institutions interested in supporting farmer institutions have to address.

In this regard, Ugandan Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) have been working with farmer grassroots institutions to help them improve their capabilities in demanding their rights. During the first half of 2005, Development Network of Indigenous Voluntary Associations (DENIVA), in particular carried out an analytical study on farmer groups under National Agricultural Advisory Services (NAADS), to establish their viability to address farmer concerns. The study revealed important deficits in the capabilities of farmer groups as institutions for promoting farmer interests at local and national levels. It is these deficits of farmer institutions in Uganda that DENIVA intends to contribute to their redress in this article. The article is part of a follow up of the 2005 study and is focused at performance of farmer groups as grassroots institutions responsible for the development of farmers.

In programme and project implementation, **effectiveness** refers to how far potential benefits were realized or whether the programme/project has achieved its purpose. Effectiveness answers the big question of what difference the project/programme has made in practice. For the NAADS programme effectiveness should measure to what extent the intended beneficiaries (smallholder farmers), have really benefited from its products or services. The focus of this article however is not to evaluate NAADS, but rather to look at the quality of farmer groups as grassroots channels for NAADS implementation.

Farmer groups in Uganda take different modes, but were mostly brought into mainstream economy by the NAADS programme although CSOs have been working with these institutions for much longer. A strong farmer institutional framework would have been a blessing for NAADS implementation. Unfortunately, Uganda's farmer institutions remain weak, a fact that has affected the implementation of the programme. This was aggravated by massive formation of new but poor quality farmer groups at the initiation of the programme mostly due to high farmer expectations of accessing free money from NAADS. The majority of such groups have since collapsed after realising there was not any free money.

The formation of farmer groups in Uganda has been engineered, **either**, by externalities, such as the presence of donor funding through NGOs as intermediary beneficiaries, **or**, in some cases by farmers to solve challenges they face. In the latter cases, the idea of groups is copied from experiences of existing groups in the neighbourhood, friends or relatives that belong to such groups. In a recent review of farmer groups supported by different organisations, DENIVA has established the following to be among the major reasons/objectives for starting farmer groups:

To access support from donors and NAADS

To access training in improved husbandry practices

To pull resources together and address their challenges

To address food security issues

To help one another in case of need (such as sicknesses, burial ceremonies and school fees requirements)

To carry out collective procurement of inputs and marketing of produce

Moral uprightness (for youth farmer groups)

To ease work for groups that carry out communal cultivation

To lend money in 'circles' or as the case of need may rise with members

To make monthly savings

One needs to understand the reasons/objectives for the formation of a particular group in order to render it assistance. It also seems that the quality of farmer groups is associated with the founding reasons for the group. Groups founded on clumsy reasons like accessing money from NAADS or by local politicians as stepping stones for political advancement, do not get firmly established and end up not achieving tangible results. The quality of a group highly depends on the relevancy of the group's objectives to its members and the ability of the group to assert itself in the service of its members, especially through active participation in policy formulation and demanding from government its due share of the resources for investment and development budgets. Farmers are interested in institutions that can help them solve their current problems, which may include poverty, poor agricultural practices, improved social capital (cohesion), school fees and cultural ceremonies like burials. In Kabale for example, farmer groups associated with Africa 2000 Network (A2000N) appear to be relevant and of better quality because they started by addressing issues of vegetable production for household food security which had been a problem to housewives. By helping farming households to establish backyard vegetable gardens as sources of green vegetables traditionally used in the preparation of soups to accompany main meals, households found A2000N relevant to their situations and show a

lot of loyalty to the groups associated with A2000N and its activities. Another qualitative factor associated with the popularity of A2000N groups in Kabale is the introduction of improved hygiene practices involving hanging water containers and soap near latrines for washing hands after visiting the latrine. This practice is also associated with using local materials like ashes to disinfect latrines to reduce smell and disease transmission. The two practices were in some cases praised by the beneficiaries as pre-requisite for agricultural development. This confirms the CSOs advocacy to approach farmer groups as institutions for total livelihoods rather than limiting activities to monetary values only. This is the point where CSOs differ and criticise the NAADS approach of stand alone objectives of agricultural commercialisation. On the other hand farmers argue in support of the livelihoods approach because *“they cannot think of money making when they are food insecure and with poor health.”*

In terms of capabilities, this seems to be the major hindrance affecting the quality of farmer groups. Quality is looked at in this case in terms of farmers’ ability to actively participate and demand what is due to them at local and national level. The capabilities required include:

Skills in analysing situations surrounding and affecting them or ability to hire professionals to analyse the situation for them. This also includes the ability to identify existing agricultural business opportunities. For example, in Arua district Bee Natural Products Limited installed and has been operating a modern honey processing plant for over two years. The plant has a capacity to process all the honey produced in North Western region of Uganda and there are a number of farmer groups involved in various agricultural activities including apiculture. Some of the groups have got their membership contributions and savings laying in their accounts with banks and SACCOs, while at the same time having few bee hives and asking for assistance from donors and the IFSG of NAADS. In one case for example, a youth farmer group in Ullepi subcounty of Arua district had Shs: 360,000 partly with their treasury and partly in their SACCO account. The group had 20 Kenya Top Bar (KTB) hives, 10 from the Integrated Farmer Support Group (IFSG) of NAADS as seed capital (internal resource mobilisation), and another 10 from a PMA grant. Their own funds of Shs; 360, 000 would enable them purchase another 10 KTBs. A hive yields about 12-15 kg of honey each at Shs: 1100/kg for the previous season and has no other major input, when compared for example with crop production. Against these facts the same youthful farmers are crying that their major problem is lack of capital!

In Kayunga district, an ACE lacking in market skills could not market pineapples to a supermarket market opening. This was mainly because of lack of marketing skills, including the inability of the ACE’s marketing committee to reject their members’ below - quality pineapples that were not matching the quality required by the supermarket.

Enterprise selection is another area. Some groups in Kabale and Arua openly confessed of their incapacity to genuinely select commercial enterprises based on their cost-benefit analysis, while nearly all groups interviewed complained of lack of markets or their inability to penetrate existing markets. NAADS’ Farmer Institutional Development (FID) pre-service delivery training is supposed to help farmers learn the methodology of enterprise selection, but farmers complained of the short period the training takes and the intermittent nature of NAADS’s FID approach.

Demanding from government what is genuinely due to the farming community. Compared for example to Uganda Manufacturers Association (UMA) which now influences not only the government policy, but also the budgeting processes, the farming community remains far below the required advocacy and lobbying levels. Farmers do not yet have a strong analytical and advocacy national secretariat at local and national level to present and advocate for farmers’ problems. The weakness at national level stems from weaknesses at grassroots level. Good quality farmer groups at grassroots level that can present their demands at lower levels would

network and translate into good quality national level Farmer Organisation to represent farmers' interests.

At this stage it is probably important to explain a bit why DENIVA and other CSOs are putting emphasis on farmer groups. It is basically because farmer groups are looked at as building blocks for a "*Farmers' National Tower*" for participating in national issues that affect agriculture. If the building blocks of the tower are weak, the tower collapses and if they are strong the tower flourishes into the sky.

Emerging evidence is that starting from humble beginnings, there is hope that groups could be transformed into stronger institutions, as evidenced in Kabale through the formation of *Kabale Farmers Networking Association (KAFNA)*, formed from the realisation by different farmer groups (especially the ones working with A2000N), to create a common voice for smallholder farmers in Kabale with a vision "*improved food security and increased incomes in the smallholder farm families.*" Such institutions which derive from pressing problems experienced by the farming community are bound to succeed, but require facilitation in terms of building capabilities and systems in various disciplines that affect their performance.

Even in developed countries, this approach is also used to lobby and advocate for communities' rights. In the European Union (EU) for example, an association of produce retailers has succeeded in making their demands be included in the safety and quality requirements of all agricultural imports into the EU, under the auspices of Euro-Retailer Produce working group's Good Agricultural Practices (EUREPGAP). Of course EU farmers have been at the game for much longer compared to Ugandan farmers and that is why initially the Ugandan farmers require support in building systems and capabilities, to improve their quality and performance of their duties. The support can be provided by donors and government. This area is actually more in need than the traditional approach of providing only technical assistance, which also requires systems to be effective. Actually the NAADS programme would have been more successful if such systems have been in place.

Conclusively, Uganda should think of formalising all modes of farmer groups into legally binding institutions like cooperative societies and then design a policy of strengthening them to be effective voices and institutions for rural development and participation in local and national policy formulation and as programme implementation channels. Donor supported groups which are already in this line of approach should be supported under private-public partnerships to improve the approach and to provide experiential learning to the new starters.

Good bye for now.