

Assessing Agricultural Extension Support on the Food Security Projects in the Vhembe District of Limpopo Province, South Africa

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KEYWORDS Assessment. Food Security. Extension Support. Beneficiaries. Poverty Alleviation

ABSTRACT The food security community projects, which were initiated by the government of the Republic of South Africa to alleviate poverty in the country, have proved unsustainable and challenging to provide satisfaction to the government in terms of the creation of jobs and alleviation of poverty. The reason why these food security projects are unsustainable is inherently due to a lack of support from the extension officers in the region. The objective of this study was to assess the support that the agricultural extension is providing to the food security projects in the Vhembe district of Limpopo province, South Africa. Qualitative data were collected with semi-structured interviews that were administered to respondents from the food security projects as well as to one extension officer who was assigned to work in the food security projects in the district. In this study, focus group discussions were carried out to 15 respondents from 55 functional food security projects in the Vhembe district. Structured interviews were also carried out with 5 extension officers in the district who are working directly with food security projects. The respondents have agreed that they receive extension support most often, however, it is presumed that the results of this paper would lead to informed decisions by the spheres of government in terms of extension support programmes and help craft more viable strategies for supporting the food security projects so that they become more sustainable.

INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of democracy in South Africa in 1994, various types of agro-based food security projects have been introduced in the country, especially in rural areas (Bresciani et al. 2006). However, there is an inadequate understanding of their performance and how it can be improved. The food security projects came into existence after the government departments provided funding for their establishment. The funding was done after beneficiaries came together and agreed on the contributions for starting the project. The food security projects were not adequately monitored, hence their collapse. This study aims to assess agricultural extension support to all vegetables, broiler, and layer production-based food security projects in Vhembe Districts of Limpopo Province in South Africa. However, the food security projects, which are run by beneficiaries who initiated their establishments, were beset with numerous challenges, which should be used to guide the development of the performance-enhancing program (Nesengani 2016).

An extension is a definitely unstructured umbrella term for all activities that offer evidence and advisory services that are needed and demanded by farmers and other actors in the agri-food systems and rural development. Furthermore, the extension includes practical knowledge, facilitation, brokering, coaching of different actors to improve market access, dealing with changing patterns of risk and protecting the environment (Christoplos 2010; Kamara et al. 2016). In this study, the extension means an integral component for ensuring efficient service delivery of the programs aimed at alleviating poverty, improving livelihoods and a sustained environment.

Since 1994, several government programs aimed at improving the livelihoods of the underprivileged have been implemented. The success rate of such programs was meager (Nesengani 2016). In his study, Nesengani (2016) highlighted that beneficiaries of government intervention invariably identified extension and advisory services as the weak link working against the full impact of government farming programs. Extension Recovery Plan (2008/9-2010/11), which is a program aimed at the revitalisation of

extension and advisory services in South Africa, was introduced by the central Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries. The ERP aided the extension workers to reach out to the clients without difficulties because they were given all the gadgets necessary for the execution of their duties. The government introduced the strategic objectives to capacitate extension and advisory services in the country. One of the pillars or strategic objectives in the extension recovery plan was that of ensuring visibility and accountability of extension (DAFF 2011). This pillar aimed to make sure that green book, smart pens, laptops, and subsidised vehicles are provided to extension officers so that their work can be visible. These tools assisted extension officers to deliver the services to the underprivileged without difficulties. The extension officers can now communicate with service providers while being at the site of the farm, and they can drive around in subsidised vehicles and deliver services easily.

In light of the matters as mentioned above, the services that were supposed to be rendered to the food security projects were not enough since most food security projects collapsed (Nesengani 2016). The existence and status of most food security projects in Limpopo province are not known, and most of them are not on the database of the government. This has resulted in food security projects that were not being monitored and appropriately evaluated (Nesengani 2016). This previous study was comprehensive and focussed on all the districts of the province, but not enough data emerged for the Vhembe District. The study on food security projects that were previously conducted by Nesengani (2016) reveals in table 1 that there were about 35 vegetables, 15 broiler and 5 layer production functional food security projects.

Table 1: Functional food security projects in Vhembe District

<i>Types of food security projects</i>	<i>No.</i>
Vegetables	35
Broilers	15
Layers	5

Purpose of the Study

This study intends to assess the support that the agricultural extension is providing to

the food security projects in the Vhembe District of Limpopo province, South Africa. The problems encountered by these food security projects typically revolve around financial management that led to the collapse of most of these food security projects in the district. The extension officers' visits to the food security project sites will minimise their collapse. The support model for developing food security projects that is possible the closest to an ideal is where the extension officers carry the responsibility to facilitate the training of beneficiaries of such food security projects and to visit the sites regularly.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

This food security study was conducted in the Vhembe District of Limpopo Province in South Africa. The study was conducted after the researchers in the Province have reported that most of the food security projects were collapsing. The researcher then developed an interest to investigate the cause since he had in the past researched food security projects in the province of Limpopo, South Africa.

Demographic

Vhembe District is found in the northern part of Limpopo Province, bordering Botswana in the northeast, Zimbabwe in the north, and Mozambique in the east. Vhembe District is composed of four local municipalities, namely, Makhado, Musina, Thulamela, and Collins Chabane as shown in fig 1. Vhembe district has a population of approximately 1,393,949 and covers an area of 27,969,148 square kilometers, the coordinates are 22°76'96'S, 29°97'41'E (VDM, 2019). The respondents in this research include the beneficiaries of food security projects, mostly illiterate women between the ages of 46 to 58 years, and extension officers who were working directly with food security projects in the Vhembe District, where the study was conducted. Hallaway (1997) hinted that data collection in qualitative research involves gathering information through a variety of data such as interviews, focus group discussions, and observation schedules.

In this study, data collection was done using focus group discussions with beneficiaries of food security projects because a focus group

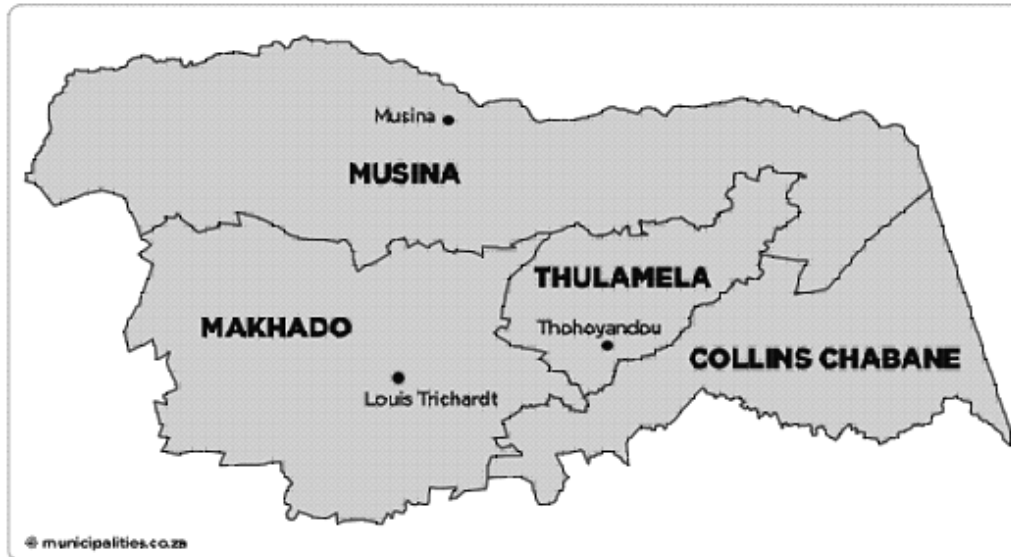


Fig. 1. Map of Vhembe District (DC34) in Limpopo Province, South Africa

interview is a means to understand how people feel or think about an issue, product or service. Respondents were selected because they have specific common characteristics related to the topic of the focus group (De Vos et al. 2005). Structured interviews were conducted with extension officers (Terreblanche et al. 2010) as this is the most rigorous and the least flexible form of an interview in which predetermined questions are put up to each interviewee in a specific order and the responses are logged, and notes are taken or recorded electronically.

The study is thus, qualitative in its approach. According to Polit et al. (2010), qualitative studies focus on the dynamic, holistic, and individual aspects of phenomena and attempt to describe those aspects in their entirety, within the context of those who are experiencing them. Naturalistic studies that use qualitative methods for data collection yield rich, in-depth evidence that can potentially elucidate the multiple dimensions of a complicated phenomenon. The findings from qualitative research are typically grounded in the real-life experiences of people with first-hand knowledge of a phenomenon. In this study, focus group discussions were conducted with 15 respondents on 55 food security projects, while

structured interviews were conducted with 5 extension officers in which interview guides were used to collect data from both ward and district-based extension officers. The respondents of this study include 15 participants from food security projects and 5 extension officers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The food security projects were established to operate within the government mandate of alleviating poverty and creating jobs (RSA Constitution 1996; DoA 2002). Data was collected using the focus group discussions with 15 respondents from 55 food security projects. In all the sites where this study was conducted, the study recorded that respondents agreed that there is support from the extension officers. The support is not provided one hundred percent, though, because 7 respondents out of 15 have said that extension officers did not have transport to visit such food security projects because some of them are not accessible due to their remoteness, and therefore the extension officers visit the sites occasionally. The respondents in this study have highlighted to the researcher that they continue to get extension support.

They indicated that extension officers advised them to enlarge their business to produce more for the market in the future, to access market, to open the abattoir for slaughtering their chickens so that their business can also improve as shown in Table 2. Upon further interviews the respondents, this study reveals that the majority of the respondents (80%) have found the support given to them was relevant, while twenty percent of them found it irrelevant. Structural interviews were conducted with the extension officers who were supposedly the providers of extension service in the food security projects in the Vhembe District. The majority of extension officers (80%) provide the extension services to the food security projects, while twenty percent of them have said that they occasionally visit the food security projects because of transport constraints (Nesengani 2016). The extension support services offered are advisory and marketing information. The food security projects receive training support from the local Madzivhandila College of Agriculture. They further said that they believed that the training services provided by this college were of immense importance for the food security project in its operation. The areas in which this college offers training on are bookkeeping, financial management, and marketing. Upon further interrogation, the respondents from the food security projects have identified the following training needs, that is, computer skills, which are necessary for their daily operations as they are an entity that are operating in the 4th industrial revolution, conflict management skills so that they can be able to manage conflicts should they arise, and leadership skill for effective managing and running of the food security projects.

Table 2: Support provided to the food security projects by extension officers

<i>Beneficiaries response</i>	<i>Percentages</i>
Advice on enlarging the business	20
Advice on market access	8
Advice on opening abattoir	12
Advice on production improvement	60

CONCLUSION

To know and understand the operation of the food security projects and their mandates

well as an important aspect, one has to take into consideration in the districts of Limpopo Province. These food security projects were serving a specific mandate, namely, that of creating jobs and providing for food security in the communities. Although not on a large scale, food security projects were generating income to their beneficiaries. The study also proved that the extension officers and the local college of agriculture transferred the skills and resources to members. The food security projects are operating far away from each other, and one needs the assistance of a motor vehicle to travel from one food security project to the next. Therefore, the department of agriculture must make provision of such transport for the benefit of such food security projects. It could be concluded from this study that extension officers were providing support to the food security projects. However, the projects were beset with numerous challenges theft of stock and other properties, but this does not deter them from working and producing to satisfy the market. The study highlighted the following issues that need to be taken into account by the extension services, that is, capacity building and development of monitoring systems.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study has yielded several valuable recommendations for consideration by the extension services in the district, namely, capacity building and development of monitoring systems by the extension services. The recommendations that emanated from the study could be broadly categorised into future research and policy issues:

1. There is a necessity for capacity building and intensification of advisory services to the beneficiaries of food security projects. Presently, very few are done to capacitate the beneficiaries of food security projects, although it was highlighted during the interviews with respondents that Madzivhandila College of Agriculture is providing training, this is not done to the satisfaction of beneficiaries since these food security projects are not operating at the level they are supposed to operate from.
2. There is a need for further research that includes the assessment of food security projects in other districts of South Africa.

3. There is a need for an organised market for the commodities produced in the food security projects as extension officers have always advised.
4. Advice to be given to traditional leaders for the provision of extra land to food security projects that need to expand their farming operations.

In achieving the objectives of assessment of agricultural extension support on the food security projects in the Vhembe District of Limpopo Province, South Africa, and this study did not produce very conclusive results. This has consequently opened up the subsequent avenues for further investigation. The findings of this study cannot be generalised as this study was conducted in the Vhembe District of Limpopo Province. The findings may not necessarily produce the same results for other provinces in the Republic of South Africa, therefore, there is a need to conduct similar study in other provinces within the Republic of South Africa and beyond to determine the assessment of agricultural extension support on the food security projects so that the Sustainable Development Goals Number 1 and Number 2 can be addressed.

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**Paper received for publication in October, 2019
Paper accepted for publication in November, 2019**