

ICT Update

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Data4Ag: New opportunities for organised smallholder farmers



Farmer registration and development – the SACAU experience in Lesotho and eSwatini

Fhumulani Mashau

Dispersed smallholder farmers in Sub-Saharan Africa are at risk of social and economic exclusion. Digital innovation and an enabling policy environment can help smallholders to transition out of poverty. The **Southern African Confederation of Agricultural Unions (SACAU)** considers farmers' organisations to be the key to drive this change.

Farmers' organisations can act as representative bodies to leverage services and mobilise resources to support farmers. However, verifiable membership data is necessary to enhance their credibility and legitimacy, to mobilise negotiating power and to work on evidence-based advocacy to give a voice to small-scale farmers.

The accumulation of membership data by farmers' organisations can improve delivery of services to farmers.

Farmer data – a powerful resource

Concerned about the paucity of farmers' organisations' membership data, SACAU supported by AgriCord and CTA, has been working on a project to register farmers for its member organisations in the kingdoms of Lesotho and

eSwatini. Launched in 2016, this project has led to the development of an Electronic Membership Data Management System for the Swaziland National Agricultural Union (SNAU) and Lesotho National Farmers Union (LENAFU).

Through the creation of this data infrastructure, SACAU aims to improve service delivery by farmers' organisations, such as improved access to extension services, markets or financing, to improve farmers' incomes. Furthermore, the collected farmer data can be monetised through trade with other economic players such as seed, fertiliser, agricultural input and processing firms. Data can therefore serve as an additional revenue source for farmers' organisations and their members. By demonstrating these benefits, increasing numbers of farmers are encouraged to register. As the farmers' organisations accumulate more members and farmers' data, they strengthen their position as advocates for farmers in their respective regions.

A no mean feat, this project was made possible by over 50 field facilitators who took to the field to register the farmers in their localities. Armed with smart phones, the facilitators registered over 52,000 farmers for LENAFU and 23,000 for SNAU. Data such as the age, location, gender and farming activities were compiled in the digital platform. With the project nearly complete, this data can be translated into information and narratives for a multiplicity of purposes.

Both LENAFU and SNAU were set-up with the objective to promote an enabling (policy) environment through



advocacy and to represent the interests of their members. Their databases allow them to work with their governments on subsidy programmes for the benefit of their members. The Government of the Kingdom of eSwatini has, for example, requested SNAU to assist in the registration of farmers under a government input subsidy programme.

Advocacy and collaboration

Data collection is, however, not an end in itself; it does not automatically improve the work of farmers' organisations or farmers' standard of living. What is important is sensitivity to the socio-political nature of data. To give power to farmer data, farmers' organisations need to meet governance.

There are two areas where farmers' organisations and governments can mutually benefit from profiling.

Firstly, since few African countries possess reliable public sector institutional statistical capacity, farmers' organisations and governments should explore joint ventures for data collection. This is hardly contentious as African governments committed themselves to allocating at least 10% of their national budgets to agriculture and rural development within five years after the 2003 African Union Heads of State and Government Summit. This commitment, which many governments are yet to meet, can neither be fulfilled, nor can the interventions make the necessary impact without reliable statistical data. Farmers' data could be used either as a source of information or as a verification mechanism complementing official data collection processes.

Secondly, since advocacy is ultimately a political vocation, data collection by farmers' organisations should inform advocacy campaigns for the implementation or review of existing government policy commitments and policy change. Whereas farmers' organisations and governments may not always agree, their interests are best served by forging co-operative relations.

"This project and the publicity it generated has positioned SNAU as a partner organisation of choice for various stakeholders including government for initiatives involving farmers in the country. It has also improved the standing of SNAU as a repository of farmers' data in the country"

– Mr Nqobizwe Dlamini, SNAU Project Coordinator.

An enabling policy environment for rural development should also translate into physical services. In developing countries, data collection is time consuming and costly. In Lesotho and eSwatini, project facilitators had to contend with intermittent mobile network coverage, inadequate energy sources, and poor road accessibility.

The construction of physical and digital infrastructures that link urban areas – which are often the locus of trade – to rural communities is key to ensure inclusion of peripheral farmers.

Bridging between producers and policy-makers

The accumulation of membership data by farmers' organisations can improve delivery of services to farmers to enhance their income, and provides these organisations with the evidence and legitimacy to advocate farmers' needs. As such, farmers' organisations become trust centres that bridge between farmers, policy-makers and value chain actors.

To upscale data collection through farmers' organisations, an integrated approach is needed whereby public, private and development partners collaborate. The development sector should continue to strengthen the strategic capacities of farmers' organisations, including in digital and business development and support farmer registration to enhance the provision of services to farmers. Farmers' organisations should continue to mobilise farmers and aggregate needs and supply to strengthen the position of smallholder farmers. At the same time, investments are needed by the public sector in ICTs, (digital) infrastructure, institutions and public services, and agricultural policies.

In Lesotho and eSwatini, the two national farmers unions are now poised to improve their policy-making and membership service processes, and to better engage in targeted advocacy programmes that should contribute to improved standards of living for their members. Yet work remains to be done. With the continuation of their registration efforts, additional information will be collected and added to the platform to enhance reliability, gain greater clarity on the sector and region and support planning and policy intervention measures. ●

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