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Accuracy, Relevance and Timeliness: Does Extension Practitioners Satisfy Clients? A Case of Farmers in Nkonkobe, South Africa

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KEYWORDS Assessment. Confidence. Quality. Programme. Dimension

ABSTRACT The study investigated the perception of the farmers in relation to the three dimensions: accuracy, relevance and timeliness of extension service delivery. The objectives of this study were: To determine the farmers' assessment of extension services in the dimension of accuracy, relevance and timeliness. To investigate the extension experience and contacts in the last 6 months Random sampling was used to select 900 farming households. The 5-point Likert scale was used to measure the level of satisfaction derived from the extension services. Findings revealed that contacts with extension practitioners were 22.22 percent, while seminar and workshop contact was the highest with 74.44 percent. The dimension of satisfaction varied: on accuracy results showed that 11.11 percent of the respondents were very satisfied while 16.88 percent were satisfied with a *p-value* = 0.01. The relevance dimension of extension services were 17.11 percent very satisfied and 13.33 percent satisfied (*p-value* = 0.21). The paper concluded that the awareness and satisfaction derived from the services offered by the extension practitioners are gradually gaining momentum and relevancy amongst the organisation.

INTRODUCTION

Amidst diverse agro-ecological and sectorial natural resources accompanied with impressive land scape which favours intensive agricultural production in South Africa; poverty reduction is attainable when agricultural extension education is given prominence in the area of accuracy, relevance and timeliness of operation and services. The only way to the development of agriculture at the household level is the provision of undiluted extension services; development of complete paradigm for the establishment of social safety; agricultural education and health services (OECD 2006). The satisfaction derived by the farmers from the extension services in South Africa have been so low, as quality has been compromised with intervention being proactive instead of being active (Agholor et al. 2013). The extension practitioners' identification of local structures and networking with the farming communities have been inadequate and in most cases very weak in areas where it is available. Extension services in South Africa have been criticized overtly for general lack of evaluation of services offered coupled with low technical efficiency of the extension advisors. Skill shortages within extension coupled with

uncoordinated extension services has been attributed to the failures of most agricultural projects in South Africa (South African Parliament 2011; Rivera 2003).

Extension services when likened to operations management has customers or clients. Extension customers or clients are the farmers who play an important role in the agricultural production process. In adopting policies, strategies and structures within the agricultural sector, the clients or customers are the first consideration by the management (Lee and Ritzman 2005). Popular issues that are often raised in needs assessment of the farmers in the production process which include setting of clientele priorities and determining whether gaps exist in line with what is already known and the unknown; and what will be the outcome in terms of planning and development of the extension programmes. Conceptualizing the felt needs and resolving the unmet needs remains an important skill required by every extension practitioner to be able to render and deliver impeccable extension education (Terblanche 2008). Reflecting on clients' needs in extension is not only important but also satisfaction derived in the area of accuracy, relevance and timeliness of operation, must be seen as an overwhelming task to build confidence. The pro-

vision of quality extension services that is built on relevance, accuracy and timeliness of operation is dependent on clientele feedback on the satisfaction received from the extension advisors. Most service providers are adopting quality management programmes to be able to compete and provide satisfactory services because quality impacts on the product performance and on client satisfaction (Kotler et al. 2002). The value for goods and services are often created when it benefits the community thus members of the society who may not access such benefits will validate its funding as public goods (Kalambokidis 2005). Quality of extension services is hinged on the dimension of relevance, accuracy, and timeliness which is the direct outcome of satisfactory performance within an establishment (Haile and Israel 2005). Extensionist must exhibit a level of competence and must be disposed to clientele ultimate satisfaction (Allen 2004). Therefore, there is justification for evaluating the quality of extension programme in the dimension of relevance, accuracy and timeliness in South Africa. The inadequate confidence, accuracy, relevance and timeliness of extension services to the needs of the farmers coupled with general apathy in participating in extension programmes gave in to a very clear justification for the need to undertake this research. Admittedly, extension education has profound influence on the rural livelihoods but its effectiveness is doubtful in South Africa. Numerous reports and discussions with farmers, at different areas within the region indicated that the performance of extension activities are disappointing and unsatisfactory. Nevertheless, these assumptions are not expatiated with empirical evidences, while many argued that it is bias and lopsided to conclude without all-inclusive study. This assumption calls for further investigation, hence the need for this research.

Objectives

The study aimed at determining the farmers' assessment of extension services in the dimension of accuracy, relevance and timeliness of operations. Following the reviewed literature, this research assumed that extension services in South Africa as perceived by the farmers, lacks accuracy, relevance and timeliness. Furthermore, the satisfaction dimension could be perceived differently by the gender. Therefore, the objectives of this study were:

- (i) To determine farmers' assessment of the extension services in the dimension of accuracy, relevance and timeliness.
- (ii) To investigate extension experience and contacts in the last 6 months.

METHODOLOGY

The Approach Adopted

The research adopted an exploratory and descriptive approach involving review of the secondary literature sources and the use of both well-structured and semi-structured interview guides. The quantitative and qualitative questionnaire techniques were used. The inherent advantages of using both quantitative and qualitative methods are to allow for quality of assessment of the respondents views and also in-depth understanding of the problem being studied (World Bank 2003). The objectives of the study was accomplished by collating views gathered from the respondents. Although there are numerous other factors such as socio-demographic elements and farm characteristics other than accuracy, relevance and timeliness (Raboca 2006), the researcher's interest on accuracy, relevance and timeliness of extension services for this study stems from the fact that farmers' satisfaction is intertwined with these three dimensions of satisfaction. Also, providing services that is accurate, relevant and timely is a critical issue when it comes to the farmers' contentment within the farm environment of today.

In this research, clientele satisfaction is lucidly explained in terms of services offered and not products. Extension Service satisfaction dimension which includes accuracy, relevance and timeliness were used as a measure of the farmers' perception of the extension services provided. The dimensions of satisfaction were Accuracy- expressed as the confidence that a particular service conforms to the pre-determined condition; relevance- exactness of information that meets expectations; and timeliness-the punctuality in responding and disseminating results or services to the farmers. Farmers who were present during the workshop, conferences, seminars and farmers' day were targeted through a sequence of contacts from 2012 – 2014. The sum of 900 respondents participated in the survey and are made up of female: 144 (2012), 155 (2013),

151(2014) and male 160 (2012), 158(2013), 132(2014) respectively. The distributed questionnaires covered the sections on: satisfaction based on three dimensions (accuracy, relevance and timeliness) and the socio-economic characteristics. The 5-point Likert scale was used to measure the level of satisfaction derived from the extension services. The subsequent effect and the degree of satisfaction from the use of extension services examined in the survey were: whether the farmers' problem were solved or questions raised by farmers were answered, and sharing of concurrent information with other farmers.

Sample and Sampling Procedure

Nine hundred farmers were selected purposively for the study. Randomization of sampling was used, implying that no sub-groupings were favoured in the sample collection. These samples were collected from the farmers in the Nkonkobe Local Municipalities.

Data Analysis Method

Statistical analysis procedures were used for the collected quantitative data involving frequency and percentages. The 5-point Likert scale was used to measure the level of satisfaction derived from the extension services. The subsequent effect and the degree of satisfaction from the use of extension services determined in the survey were: whether the farmers' problems were solved or the questions raised by the farmers were answered and sharing information with other farmers. The descriptive statistics were used to analyze some of the variables and was also tested by applying the chi-square using SPSS. Reliability analysis was also done to determine the degree to which measures were free from errors.

RESULTS

In Table 1, result of the demographic characteristics of farmers indicated that 14.66 percent were between the age ranges of 31-40; 31.11 percent (41-60); 27.55 percent (61-80); 17.77 percent (81-100); and 8.88 percent (100 and above) respectively. Though age was not a determinant variable in the research, it bears noting that farmers whose age ranges from 31 to 40 were distinct in the survey. The educational level of the farm-

ers shows that 13.77 percent had no formal education, while 18.22 percent had a primary education, and 22.88 percent (junior secondary), 35.11 percent (senior secondary) and 20 percent (tertiary education) respectively. The farmers who lived in the farm were 31.11 percent as against 68.88 percent that resided outside the farm. Farmer's contacts with extension practitioners revealed that farm visit were 22.22 percent, while seminar and workshop contact was the highest with 74.44 percent. Visitation or contacts with the farmers remained the focal issues in the present extension discourse. Regular extension visit assisted in monitoring the farmers' progress and aroused interest and motivation. Nevertheless, there was a plethora of evidence suggesting that extension contact were minimal as against the required level.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of farmers

<i>Demographic characteristics</i>	<i>Household (N=900)</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Age in years</i>		
31-40	132	14.66
41- 60	280	31.11
61- 80	248	27.55
81-100	160	17.77
100 and above	80	8.88
<i>Education</i>		
No formal school	124	13.77
Primary school	164	18.22
Junior secondary	116	22.88
Senior secondary	316	35.11
Tertiary	180	20.00
<i>Dwelling</i>		
Farm	280	31.11
Outside farm	620	68.88
<i>Extension Experience and Contacts in the Last 6 Months</i>		
Farm visitation	200	22.22
Home visitation	30	3.33
Seminar and workshop	670	74.44

In Table 2, the perception of farmers were investigated based on the dimension of accuracy, relevance, and timeliness of the extension services delivered. The result on accuracy showed that 11.11 percent of the respondents were very satisfied while 16.88 percent were satisfied with a *p-value* = 0.01 as against 32.88 percent who were dissatisfied and 24.88 percent affirmed dissatisfaction with the extension services in the dimension of accuracy. The relevance of extension services to farmers situation showed that 17.11 percent were very satisfied and 13.33 percent

asserted that they were satisfied (p-value =0.21). However, 30.22 percent of farmers were dissatisfied and 23.55 percent were very dissatisfied. In the dimension of timeliness of the services offered, 13.33 (p-value = 0.21) percent agreed that services were timely while 33.33 percent respondents were dissatisfied. However, farmers satisfaction in the areas of accuracy, relevance and timeliness maybe subjective based on the differences in their socio-economic background and perception.

Table 2: Perception on extension services delivered on the dimension of accuracy, relevance and timeliness

<i>Extension services perception</i>	<i>HH</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>P^a</i>
<i>Accuracy of Services Delivered</i>			
<i>Dimension of Accuracy</i>			
Very satisfied	100	11.11	
Satisfied	152	16.88	0.01
Undecided	128	14.22	
Dissatisfied	296	32.88	
Very dissatisfied	224	24.88	
<i>Relevance to Farmers Situation:</i>			
Very satisfied	154	17.11	
Satisfied	120	13.33	0.21
Undecided	272	15.77	
Dissatisfied	212	30.22	
Very dissatisfied	141	23.55	
<i>Timeliness of Service Delivery:</i>			
Very satisfied	120	13.33	
Satisfied	156	17.33	0.22
Undecided	136	15.11	
Dissatisfied	300	33.33	
Very dissatisfied	188	20.88	

^ap-value is the significant level for chi-square (for categorical variables), ^aOthers includes either dissatisfied or satisfied, undecided, and very dissatisfied

DISCUSSION

The study examined the farmers' satisfaction in relation to the extension services as perceived by the farmers. The need and awareness of the satisfaction survey is achievable and will go a long way in evaluating extension services not only for the farmers in the research area but also for the farmers globally. Within the contemporary extension discourse, accountability and evaluation of the services should be strengthened to harness extension activities appropriately for the agricultural development. As enunciated in the study, extension must demonstrate accountability in the dimension of accuracy, relevance and timeliness to justify services offered to the farmers. Following these findings, stake-

holders will be aware of the benefits of adopting participatory approach and allow for equal involvement of male and female in the decision making process. Generally, stakeholders and the extension service sector should uphold farmers' satisfaction in other to build a sustained confidence within the extension carousel. Extension programme sustainability depends on the aptness of the farmers continued participation in the extension programme, hence the three dimension of satisfaction as opined in this research should be taken seriously. As alluded to in the study, differences in the perception has a relation to the extension service satisfaction as exemplified by the positive responses from the farmers'. The inference here is that farmer's socio-economic background may influence satisfaction. This result lead credence to similar findings of Davis (2006) that farmers may perceive the quality of the extension services differently. The implication of this finding is that the extension service practitioners should be aware of individual differences and avoid the infallibility of "one size fits all" approach. It is therefore apparent that the extension service providers, policy makers and stakeholders should concentrate on the evaluation of satisfaction derived by the farmers in the dimension of accuracy, relevance and timeliness. The three dimension of satisfaction are not the only variables affecting the farmers' satisfaction within the extension domain as other factors were highlighted from a follow up question during the interview.

CONCLUSION

The specific objectives were to: determine farmers' assessment of extension services in the dimension of accuracy, relevance and timeliness and secondly to investigate perceived experiences of extension services by the male and female farmers. However, the outcome herein suggests that when providing services that are aimed at winning the farmers confidence and satisfaction, extension practitioners need to improve on the three dimensions of satisfaction as enunciated in the study. The outcome and findings of the study show relevance to all the categories of the clients or the consumers and the marketing consultants. Furthermore, the awareness of satisfaction derived from services offered is gradually gaining momentum and relevance amongst organisation as it allows for product confidence

developed over time by clients. Clients' satisfaction has become the latest strategy for most sectors in the present day business environment hence most establishments are clamouring for total quality management that cuts across quality and satisfaction. In conclusion, there is always more to do as many are still striving and exploring ways and means of doing it better and also trying to gain the farmers confidence.

RECOMMENDATIONS

With the application of active learning methods, it is expected that farmers will not only appreciate and come to a deeper understanding of the issues involved, but also assist in their motivation and heightening of enthusiasm. It is noteworthy to understand that every extension advisor and the farmers bring with them into the extension information programme a diversity of skills, experiences and expectations. However, this allows for interplay of ideas which in the long run will assist in shaping the dynamics of the extension practice. The paper recommends that it is pertinent to reflect on the extension programmes delivered to the farmers in the dimension of accuracy, relevance and timeliness. The paper also recommends proper evaluation of the content of the extension programme and a mix of delivery methods must be used to obtain a desired result. It is necessary to adopt an appropriate level of evaluation of extension services to account for the accuracy, relevancy and timeliness of services offered to the farmers.

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