

Empowering Emerging Commercial Farmers: Case Studies of Successes

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In 1994 NAMPO, in conjunction with the Grain Crops Institute (GCI) and Omnia as the sponsor, initiated a three phased programme aimed at empowering black farmers to become commercialised. The three phases were:

- (1) A booklet "A Key to Successful Farming" dealing with the basics of soil as a resource, climate, crop production, capital and finance, marketing and market potential for various products, was developed as a starting point in supplying elementary information to developing farmers;
- (2) A set of production management guides for specific crops;
- (3) Written information on farm management combined with courses on different aspects of farm management.

The booklet "A Key to Successful Farming" was published in 1996. Judging from the response it soon became clear that there was a greater need to form study groups for farmers to address more urgent basic needs for farming skills than to continue with phases 2 and 3 of the project. NAMPO was severely constrained by a lack of capacity.

At the same time in 1996, Cois Harman initiated, in conjunction with Agri North West, a project to train farmers. In 1998 this project was extended to other provinces with financial support from NOPO through the Oil Seeds Trust.

With the amalgamation of the different producer organisations NAMPO, NOPO, SPO and WPO into a single grain producer organisation, Grain SA (GSA), the time was ripe to begin making a difference in farmer development. With their forces combined and with the considerable expertise, know-how, organising ability and drive, GSA with technical support from GCI and financial support from the Maize Trust, the Oil Seeds Trust and to a lesser degree the Land Bank, launched the study group project countrywide.

THE STUDY GROUP PROJECT

- Study groups of not more than 25 farmers are formed. The concept of study groups was adopted because of the history of success achieved through study groups (discipline, small, sharing, record keeping, etc.)
- Annually, each member of a study group is given the opportunity, through grants of inputs, to plant his/her own small trial plot to practically and visually observe basic principles of better production practices and methods i.e. benefits of modern cultivars, correct soil and seedbed preparation, correct row widths, seed spacing and depth of planting seeds of the different crops, use of fertilizers, herbicides and insecticides.
- Approximately 20 larger trial plots are prepared annually, at which farmer days are held for a number of study groups in that area to expose them to scientific production practices on a larger scale than their trial plots, but based on the same principles.
- Farmer days are further augmented by training courses in production improvement practices, financial planning, budgeting and farm management. Specialised courses in tractor maintenance and operation are also presented on an *ad hoc* basis.
- Communication with farmers is through the study group structures and the local provincial extension offices. Information is also carried in a weekly radio broadcast (in the Tswana speaking areas) and a monthly newsletter in Tswana, North Sotho and Zulu.
- Skills training and development are done by Cois Harman, staff members of the GCI, sometimes also by input suppliers and more experienced farmers.

- ♦ Market access is facilitated and courses in marketing are presented to those individuals who perform at a level where marketing becomes an integral part of their annual business planning cycle.

RESULTS

Overall the skills and performance of farmers have improved. The proof lies in improved yields. Where sunflower yields were on average 300 to 500 kg per hectare, farmers are now harvesting in excess of 1 ton per hectare with some farmers achieving yields of more than 2 tons per hectare. Maize cultivation with better cultivars, fertilizing and chemical weed control has also improved with dramatic yields by individuals of up to 5 tons per hectare dryland and up to 10 tons per hectare under irrigation. These obviously are the exceptional results. But generally speaking, maize yields have improved dramatically.

Farmers are beginning to pay their debts; some are putting in their annual crops on a cash basis. Some farmers have even bought farms on the open market.

Present at the congress were the farmers Cois Harman, Basie Ntsimane, Solly Manoto, Paul Mutloane and Karebo Peele who are part of this project. Each of them is a case study of success.

One of them owns 15 hectares of land but farms on 600 hectares, owns his own tractors, 10 ton trailers and implements and has, this season, bought his own combine in cash. He also farms on a cash basis.

Another farmer has cultivated 1100 hectares of sunflowers with an average yield of approximately 1.6 tons per hectare. With a selling price in excess of R2000/ton you can readily determine the measure of success. (Refer to the Land Bank project).

Excellent results have come from the GSA project. Similarly the NWGA has been active in wool growing areas with, in some cases, equally spectacular results. One community increased their wool clip income from R15,000 annually to R95,000.

Obviously everybody participating in these projects has not had the same results. Some have fallen by the wayside, and will continue to do so. But, in any free market competitive environment, it will always be a question of survival of the fittest. We cannot make a commercial success of every farmer but we must not stop trying to empower whoever wishes becoming a commercial farmer and in so doing, becoming part of the mainstream of commercial agriculture.

STATISTICS

- ♦ The GSA programme currently encompasses 436 study groups with 9 681 participating farmers.
- ♦ The NWGA is involved with 181 shearing sheds reaching 5 430 communal farmers in this way.

THE DRIVER FOR A NATIONAL FARMER DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

The concern of a suitable driver for farmer development has been addressed. This driver can be the recently established Foundation for Farmer Development.

Companies and organisations involved in mainstream commercial agriculture in South Africa are all sincerely concerned about the training and development of previously disadvantaged farmers to enable them to access and participate equitably in mainstream commercial agriculture.

These role players are fully committed to the training and development of farmers but have been stymied in achieving practical ground level successes because of inefficient or non-existent delivery systems through which to channel financial and other resources. Quite often it has been difficult to identify and make contact with farmers and groups of farmers because the intermediaries like NGOs or governmental operators had other objectives in mind and suffered ability and transparency. Finances and other resources destined for farmer development projects never reached the intended beneficiaries.

Under these conditions, the initiative to establish a co-ordinating body offering membership to all role players in agriculture concerned with the training and development of commercial farmers and having as goal the co-ordinating and focusing of members' resources, be it knowledge, capacity, infrastructure or finances, on projects selected and approved against clear and definite criteria, was enthusiastically received by all and so the FFD became a reality earlier in 2002.

The mission of the Foundation for Farmer Development is to support and contribute to the *Strategic Plan for the Development of South African Agriculture* through the training and development of farmers to achieve full and free participation in sustainable commercial farming in South Africa.

Members of the Foundation commit themselves to these goals by subscribing to the *Charter of the Foundation for Farmer Development*.

The Foundation for Farmer Development is a Section 21 independent non-profit public benefit company. A democratically elected Board of Management governs the Foundation. There is only one class of member namely any person, company or organisation that subscribes to the Charter of the Foundation and pays the annual subscription fees.

Membership fees will be approved at a general meeting of the Foundation and will be utilised solely to build administrative infrastructure and capacity for the FFD.

The Foundation will be an innovative facilitator and will not endeavour to carry out development projects itself but will source funding, expertise, etc. on behalf of approved projects. Only in rare cases where no suitable driver for a specific project can be found will the Foundation, as a last resort, establish capacity to carry out such a project for example training of extension officers.

All funding for projects, with the exception of a very small management fee not exceeding 10%, will be spent at ground level on approved projects in accordance with an approved business plan and management and project monitoring protocol in place.

The benefits of membership of the FFD are obvious. Members will be part of a national movement focused on the training and development of farmers. Through the Foundation they will be part of the management and control of projects approved in accordance with specific guidelines for management and monitoring and will be assured that whatever resources are committed will be utilised to achieve the results intended. They will be part of a Foundation that will foster partnership with all other role players and that will ensure proper co-ordination with such role players.

Specific guidelines for the types of projects that will be supported have been set. All project applications will be evaluated in terms of its contribution to improved production practices and skills and enhanced market access and participation of farmers. The Foundation will establish the viability of projects, scrutinise and approve the business plan and budget, ensure the bona fides of the driver(s), and through a process of monitoring and evaluation report on the results of projects.

The auditing firm of PricewaterhouseCoopers Inc. have volunteered their services as official auditors of the Foundation whilst legal matters will be in the hands of Hofmeyer, Herbststein & Gihwala, *pro bono*. This will ensure total transparency.

CONCLUSION

The models for successful farmer development projects have been established. Thousands of farmers are being empowered to become equitable participants in commercial agriculture with the commensurate benefits to them and the country as a whole. The results are documented and available.

Quite often, these projects and the results achieved do not receive the recognition they deserve. On the one hand because we do not advertise our successes of projects, but on the other hand because recognition to these projects could be embarrassing to people who are forever trying to make political hay of farmer development. They prefer to play the game of denying that these sincere development projects exist or are successful and rather publicly suggest that nothing is being done to develop farmers.

The challenge to the Foundation for Farmer Development and all other role players will be to develop the art of teamwork and co-operation in meeting the challenges of developing the South African agriculture to its full potential to the benefit of us all.

