



Training of Extension Link Farmers on sweet potato by UNFFE and government extension workers. Photo: Stephanie v.d.Kool

UNFFE: exploring new alliances in agricultural extension

Uganda National Farmers' Federation

In the ten years since its inception, the Uganda National Farmers Federation (UNFFE) has grown to become the main representative of farmers' interests in Uganda. Currently it has more than 100,000 members throughout the country. UNFFE works both at the farm level where it provides training, advice and inputs, but also at the policy level in realisation of the important role that agricultural policy has in improving farmers' livelihoods.

UNFFE – or UNFA as it was called until February of this year – has been at the forefront of the new trends in agricultural extension. Being the main farmers' organisation in Uganda, UNFFE plays an important role in the new government's plan for modernisation of agriculture (PMA).

The fast growth of UNFFE was facilitated by donor support, but self-sufficiency has always been high on the agenda. UNFFE is trying to bring both farmers' organisations and agricultural companies under one umbrella. This is an unusual alliance that many donors and governments hope will provide part of the answer to the funding crisis for public extension. The experience of Uganda's PMA - and UNFFE – is being watched carefully by other countries that are interested in seeing whether it can work before they decide to embark on a similar strategy.

Structure, goals and services of UNFFE

The Federation was founded in 1992 by farmers throughout Uganda in response to a need for better services for and exchanges between the farming community that comprises over 80% of Uganda's population. At the same time, it was to serve as an organised channel through which government or any other interested agency could extend services to farmers. The overriding objective was to mobilise the farming community into one independent umbrella organisation. Currently, 68 farmers' organisations are members of UNFFE, 56 of them are active.

Organisationally, UNFFE consists of three main organs, i.e. the Farmers' Council, National Executive Committee and the Secretariat. The major goals are:

- To improve farmers' incomes and welfare through increasing the quality and quantity of their production by providing services to members on demand and at cost. Sustainability and farmer empowerment is of major importance.
- To bring all farmers' organisations and agro-based industries under one umbrella organisation as a common front for the promotion, co-ordination and safeguarding of their activities and interests.
- To improve the environment in which farming activities take place through lobbying and advocacy.

Services to member organisations include the following:

- Providing agricultural advisory services.
- Providing agricultural and related information through the *Farmers' Voice* magazine, topical cassettes, brochures and other publicity material.
- Organising and conducting training programmes for farmers.
- Organising agricultural fairs.
- Mainstreaming gender in all aspects of the activities of the Federation
- Lobbying and advocating for farmer-friendly agricultural policies

History of agricultural extension in Uganda

UNFFE is one of the recent developments in the history of extension in Uganda that goes back to the days of British colonialism. Over the years, several disparate agricultural extension service systems have been introduced and practised.

In the colonial period, the extension service was a regulatory and enforcement body. It was organised like an army with the farmers being the soldiers on the ground who had to implement the orders from above. A series of regulations were designed to foster quicker adoption of new practices and crops.

Later extension work shifted from enforcement to education of farmers. During this period, the extension services were commodity-based with an emphasis on export crops like cotton and coffee.

Next came the community development – cum-extension approach, whereby the general agricultural officer was simultaneously charged with administrative duties, technical promotion, distribution of inputs, credit schemes and other ad-hoc assignments such as political mobilisation and census-taking. This wide-ranging set of duties usually resulted in low performance, discontinuity and demobilisation, with little organised technical work being effectively carried out.

The Project approach followed, whereby donors funded projects of their interest and staff were as such attached to various projects within the same office. This then gave way to the "Training and Visit System" that was implemented under the Unified Agricultural Extension programme. This management system provided for regular training of extension staff by subject matter specialists (SMS), and a regimented schedule of visits to farmers. Although this system of extension improved on the preceding one, it also had its limitations.

In spite of good intentions all of the above-mentioned approaches did not address directly the needs of the farmers. Over time, farmers' needs varied, marketing was liberalised, and so the need arose for setting up farmers' associations to address the problems that are unique to farmers.

UNFFE's demand-driven, cost-recovery agricultural advisory services

In 1995, UNFFE (at that time UNFA) started implementing a demand-driven and cost recovery agricultural advisory service in five pilot districts. In each of the five districts, one county was taken as a pilot area to implement the agricultural advisory service on the principle of demand driven cost recovery. This was a new concept, which was entirely different from the government approach.

The service was established with cost recovery as a high priority to ensure sustainability, and continues to run on voluntary farmers' participation as Extension Link Farmers (ELFs) and Contact Farmers (CFs). Farmers are organised into Special Interest Groups (SIGs) depending on the farming enterprise of their interest. Each SIG has a CF who should be a model/progressive farmer whose responsibility, among others, is to demonstrate new technologies and to encourage members to adopt them through the example of his/her practical experience. An ELF is basically a teacher and should at least have good communication skills and be innovative. The ELFs are regularly trained on the job by UNFFE's professional advisors at the district level and, in turn, provide training and advice to their respective SIG members through their demonstrations.

The procedure is that ELFs carry out a training programme by adopting an appropriate technology that addresses a major constraint in the local agricultural systems of their members.

The roles of the ELFs include: providing training and basic technical support to members of the SIG on farming techniques; encouraging other farmers to form SIGs; monitoring members' farms; collecting marketing information and assisting in the formation of marketing centres. ELFs also organise exchange visits among themselves.

The National Agricultural Advisory Services

In 2000, the Ugandan government launched the "Plan for Modernisation of Agriculture" (PMA). The PMA is meant to be a holistic strategic framework for eradicating poverty through multi-sectoral interventions enabling people to improve their livelihoods in a sustainable manner. The PMA has got seven priority areas for action, one of which is the National Agricultural Advisory Services (NAADS).

The NAADS aims to be an agricultural advisory service owned by all stakeholders, and to be an effective, efficient and sustainable organ, responsive to the needs of farmers. The programme aims at engaging farmers into critical thinking and discussions regarding their agricultural endeavours and the management of their farms as a business enterprise rather than simply delivering messages and inputs for their own sake. The

underlying principle is to be responsive to the needs and demands as identified by farmers themselves, who then determine the work programmes and activities of advisors. In other words, the government has now moved away from service-driven extension to demand-driven extension services, just like UNFFE.

The role of UNFFE vis-à-vis government

The role of UNFFE is complementary rather than competitive. UNFFE has purposely recruited only a skeleton staff for co-ordination purposes, in order to also utilise the available government staff. Hence, in the implementation of UNFFE's advisory services, government extension staff has participated as subject matter specialists, resource persons, facilitators, and consultants. UNFFE, in turn, has also been used by government staff to mobilise farmers to benefit from government extension services.

UNFFE participated in the Task Force and was very actively involved in the formulation of the NAADS policy. Many of UNFFE's ideas were incorporated into the NAADS document. The NAADS is also working on the principles of being demand-driven and aiming for cost recovery. The only difference is that with UNFFE, individual farmers do the cost recovering while with the NAADS, farmers will cost recover as a group, sub-county and district.

UNFFE is a member of all NAADS institutions starting from the NAADS Board, the farmers' fora at district and sub-county levels, and in farmers' groups. UNFFE members and staff are members of the various committees and task forces of the NAADS. The federation participates in NAADS workshops and other extension service-related seminars.

The future as UNFFE sees it

Since its founding in January 1992, UNFFE has made steady progress. In its early years, UNFFE funded its activities using membership fees. From 1994, the federation started getting financial, technical and moral support from DANIDA (the Danish government's international development agency). This enabled it to acquire office premises, transport, office furniture and equipment. It also helped UNFFE to serve a growing farming community.

However, these days donor support is declining though demand for UNFFE's services is growing. The federation therefore needs to find ways to continue offering services to its members while keeping an eye on its cost-recovery plans.

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Cost recovery is not easy in practice

Stephanie de Kool worked for some years as field level advisor for UNFFE. We asked her how cost-recovery for extension services works at the field level. Here is her reply.

UNFFE's structure and cost-recovery plan for its services appear to be the solution to guaranteeing a **demand-driven** (bottom-up) and **sustainable** agricultural advisory service. However, the cost-recovery of advisory services at the grassroots level of UNFFE district organisations has not been realised to the extent envisioned. Only a small percentage of the costs of extension services are actually covered by the farmers.

Lack of cost-recovery makes the district organisations dependent on donor funds. Besides this threat, the organisations are presently weakened because staff do not get the expected percentage of their salary out of cost recovery and are therefore underpaid.

There are several factors that seem to hinder cost recovery at the grassroots level in Uganda:

- In the first place, the economic situation of average Ugandan farmers is very weak. They use the small income that they earn from marketing their produce for basic household needs and school fees for the children, rather than for agricultural training and advisory services.
- Secondly, the level of education amongst the farmer community is low. As a result, it is likely that many farmers do not value knowledge as something that can improve their livelihood. Therefore, they might be less willing to pay for knowledge than they would for something tangible.
- Thirdly, the UNFFE district organisations are limited by funds and available manpower whilst attempting to serve and organise their members, who are spread over extensive rural areas. The organisational structure is, therefore, not well established everywhere. Yet, the organisational structure of Extension Link Farmers (ELFs) leading Special Interest Groups (SIGs) at the grassroots level, is a pre-requisite for realising cost recovery of the services. Hopefully, the NAADS will result in a solution to the problem, since it provides funds that can be used by farmer communities to pay for the agricultural services they demand. The NAADS will, however, have to prove itself in the coming years. Its performance will depend to a great deal on the success of organising farmers at the grassroots level to function independently and on making the right decisions on the way funds are spent.

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