

A farmer based evaluation of the group approach to sustainable agricultural development in Sanga Sub-County, Kiruhura district, South-Western Uganda

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Abstract

Although in Uganda, the group approach has been found to be essential for farmers' accessibility to extension services among others, the perception of farmers on its performance is rarely sought. This study aimed to conduct an evaluation of the group approach to agricultural development from the point of view of the farming community in Sanga sub-county, Kiruhura District. The objectives of the study were to establish the perceptions of the farmers on the role of farmer groups, their perceptions of the challenges and possible solutions that would make group participation an avenue for individual and community development. A survey using a random sample of 117 farmers was conducted in June 2014. Employing a descriptive study design, responses on their opinions were weighted using a Likert Scale. Key informants consisting of district officials, staff of non-governmental organizations and selected farmer groups were also interviewed. The results show that group membership was positively and significantly associated, at the 5% level, to the level of education. Although the sex of the respondent was not significantly associated with group membership, non-group respondents felt there was gender-based discrimination in access to group services and benefits. While the respondents acknowledged the importance of farmer groups as avenues for the provision of agricultural inputs and extension services, inaccessibility to land and production funds propelled poor participation in farmer groups. Efforts to improve this access especially to young farmers, improve infrastructural development would enhance the contribution of the farmer group approach to sustainable agricultural development.

Key Words: *Farmer groups; Agricultural development; South-Western Uganda*

1.0 Introduction

The farmer group approach has been widely adopted as a strategy that can promote sustainable agricultural development in developing countries. In several sub Saharan countries, following the structural adjustment programs of the mid-1980s, where governments relinquished support to state controlled co-operatives, farmer groups emerged to fill the vacuum that was hence created (FAO 2010). Traditionally, government extension agencies played a critical role in ensuring that farmers had the knowledge, skills, and competencies to remain competitive and sustainable. However, since the 1980s there has been a widespread reduction in centralized, state-led extension activities across much of the developed and

developing worlds, in favour of approaches that have more involvement from the private sector and farmers themselves (Black 2000).

Farmer groups engaged in development activities, are believed to have the potential to empower their members in a number of ways. It may be through the provision of knowledge, skills, motivation, and competencies that underpin sustainable agriculture. In India, for example, farmer groups are important for social networking, establishing appropriate marketing relationships and to minimize input costs (Kalra 2013).

Today many African farmers are constrained by three critical issues namely; poor access to input and output markets, limited entrepreneurial skills for adding value to produce and to bargain

for better prices and finally limited technical skills in agricultural production. But in Malawi, farmer organizations have been found out to open up opportunities for farmers to better overcome the challenge of poor access to both inputs and output markets, limited entrepreneurial skills for adding value to produce and to bargain for better prices and finally limited technical skills in agricultural production through lobbying and collective action (Tchale 2006).

Farmer groups also have the potential to effectively influence policy outcomes in their favour which has been found out to be achieved through reorganization and mobilization of farmer groups to improve lobbying efficiency and reduce the inefficiencies caused by free riding (Magreta *et al.* 2010)

Not with standing, there is a chronic inability of smallholder farmers to have their economic interests articulated in the political process. This emanates from the way governments use policy as a bargaining outcome for private pressure groups. Governments do not often pursue transcendental social interests but rather they respond to private demands (Tchale 2006), and this lack of political wisdom to give priority to agriculture is a critical problem that threatens not only the livelihood of the smallholder farmers, but also the socio-economic progress of the country (Tchale 2006). Yet well conceptualised and supported groups like in the case of tea smallholders in Kenya have been observed to successfully drive a sub-sector where they collectively own factories, dictate on market prices and are able to employ experts, and set agenda for research (Mwaura *et al.* 2010). Despite the group approach being embraced in developing countries to addressing a plethora of rural development challenges (Loevinsohn *et al.* 1994; Woomer *et al.* 2004), queries still linger on how to enhance farmer groups' membership, cohesiveness, mandate, resources availability, integrity and members' managerial capacity (Mwaura *et al.* 2012).

Overall, farmer groups are important avenues through which farmers can access market and credit information as well as other important agricultural information like new agriculture technologies. They also form important avenues

for mobilizing farmers around a common objective especially in delivery of services and formulation of policies that support agriculture development (Adong *et al.* 2012). In Uganda, the use of farmer groups remains central to the agriculture transformation process. Farmer groups are targeted as an important means of increasing uptake of agricultural technologies to enhance agricultural productivity, commercialisation and linking farmers to markets (MAAIF 2010).

They are envisioned to play a key role in improving produce marketing, increasing access to financing and value addition and ultimately leading to agricultural transformation (MAAIF 2010). While several studies have identified the factors that influence farmers as individuals and as households to join groups (Benin *et al.* 2008; Davies *et al.* 2010; Adong *et al.* 2012) there is limited understanding of the perceptions of the farmers themselves on the approach. A farmer based evaluation of the approach would be essential in determining what, from their perspective, would propel farmer groups to deliver sustainable agricultural development.

The overall objective of this paper is to provide a farmer based evaluation of the farmer group approach to sustainable agricultural development, using farmers in Sanga Sub County, Kiruhura district, in south-western Uganda. The paper specifically identifies the farmers' perceptions of the role of farmer groups in agricultural development, identifies the challenges that farmer groups are faced with, and possible solutions from the farmers' perception.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Study Area

The study was conducted in Sanga sub county of Kiruhura district, south-western Uganda. Kiruhura is one of the rural districts of Uganda that is endowed with significant natural and human resources that can be exploited for agricultural development.

Located approximately 62 km, north-east of Mbarara town, the largest municipality in the region, and 245 km, south-west of Kampala, the capital city of Uganda, Kiruhura district is endowed with good agricultural land along the

highway between to the two large market centres in the country. The coordinates of the Kiruhura district are: 00 12 36S, 30 49 48E (Latitude: -0.2100; Longitude: 30.8300). With a population of 328, 077 (UBoS, 2015) Kiruhura is fairly populated. However, a large proportion of Sanga sub-county (five parishes out of eight) is located in Lake Mburo National Park. In the national park, there are pastoralists, mainly encroaching on the park resources.

This study was conducted in the remaining three parishes of Nombe I, Nombe II, and Rwabarata, mainly dominated by settled farmers. Although the sub county suffers prolonged drought in the months of May to late August, the climate is generally conducive for agricultural activities, with two rainy seasons a year.

2.2 Study Design

The study was qualitative in nature. A sample of 117 farmers was randomly selected from the three parishes of the sub county. These included 53 farmers who were members of farmer groups, and 53 who did not belong to any group. Key informants included 5 local council leaders and 3 agricultural extension staff. The farmers were interviewed in groups. They were asked to give their opinions on the various issues and their responses recorded. The options of their responses were given as follows; 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'not sure', and 'disagree.'

2.3 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the socio-economic characteristics of the respondents. A Likert scale was used to analyse the information collected. The selected options above were assigned weights; strongly agree= 2, agree= 1, not sure=0, and disagree=-1. The number of farmers responding with a given option was recorded, and then multiplied by the respective weight. For any given issue, the sum of the weighted options was recorded. The issues with the highest scores are regarded as important and are discussed.

3.0 Results and Discussion

3.1 Background information on the respondents

The respondents were majorly farmers engaged in crop production. 58% of these had no other

economic activities they were engaged in, while 42% had other activities such as trading, civil service among others. This indicates the importance of farming as an economic activity for the people of Sanga.

The sample was found to have 45% farmers who did not belong to a group and 55% that belonged to one. The sample included 41% females and 59% males, aged between 31-40 years. 35% were found not to have gone to school at all, while 43% had received primary education. Hence only 22% had post-primary education. The age of the farmers was found to be positively correlated with belonging to a group although not significantly, but the level of education was found to be positively and significantly ($p < 0.05$) correlated with belonging to a group. This means that more educated farmers were more likely to join farmer groups than their less educated counterparts.

3.2 Perceptions on the role of farmer groups

Although 88% of the farmers in groups were of the view that groups were beneficial to agricultural development, the farmers had various opinions on the different aspects that groups deliver. The roles that were most appreciated by the farmers included provision of extension services and agricultural inputs, facilitating access to credit and technologies for production, among other things. This is according to the weighted responses shown in Table 3.1.

The farmers mostly appreciated the role that groups play in providing extension services. The NAADS program was mainly using farmer groups to reach the farmers with extension messages through its service providers. NGOs in the area also use the same approach which reaches more farmers at a given time than if they were to be reached individually. The farmers similarly appreciated the role that groups play in providing agricultural inputs. In an interview with a NAADS extension service provider, the latter happily mentioned that

“We have been providing to farmers in their respective groups, inputs such as improved bean varieties, cassava, banana wilt resistant varieties, and

cows. We believe that these inputs are boosting agricultural productivity in the sub county”.

Active farmer groups were therefore able to obtain farm inputs from NAADS, NGOs and other government sources. 60% of the farmers in groups were satisfied with group performance in these roles.

Table 3.1: Perceptions of the farmer group members on the role of groups (n=120)

Role	Do not agree	Not sure	Agree	Strongly agree	Total
	(-1)	0	1	2	
Input provision	27	12	26	55	109
Access to market information	27	34	31	28	60
Collective bargaining	40	39	15	26	27
Advocacy	35	53	16	16	51
Access to extension services	19	18	34	49	113
Access to technologies	29	23	40	28	67
Access to credit	35	18	27	40	72
Networking	43	31	26	20	23
Self-help initiatives	42	45	12	21	12
Resource mobilization	42	37	20	21	20

Source: Survey data, June 2014

3.3 Challenges associated with farmer groups

The challenges that were identified to be major by the farmers were inadequate funding for group activities, inadequate land, illiteracy and poor road infrastructure. The weights attached to each of these are shown in Table 2. The farmers felt that groups needed financial support for group activities. Such support was not easily available for them to access as a group, although individuals who were eligible to access credit would do so. Inadequate land for agricultural production is an obvious challenge in Sanga because of the presence of the national park and most of the available land gazetted by the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA). Those farmers that would not be eligible to access credit for other activities such as processing of agricultural products, would have preferred to obtain group support for such investments. In a situation where government has gazetted most of

the agricultural land that they would use, the farmers would have preferred government to support an alternative source of livelihood for families. Farmers with limited education are found to be vulnerable in this situation.

Table 3.2: Perceptions of the farmer group members on the challenges of groups (n=117)

Challenge	Do not agree	Not sure	Agree	Strongly agree	Total
	(-1)	0	1	2	
Poor farmer participation	19	9	36	53	123
Inadequate funding	1	2	25	89	202
Inadequate land	12	11	20	74	156
Insufficient equipment	19	15	35	48	112
High interest rates	29	31	19	38	65
Illiteracy	5	20	35	57	147
Inadequate extension	6	11	55	45	139
Embezzlement and corruption	24	17	23	53	105
Conflicts and disagreements	30	26	25	36	77
Poor infrastructure	11	11	35	60	144
Poor group leadership	36	21	29	31	55

Source: Survey data, June 2014

Illiteracy is a challenge that complicates the situation. Low levels of education and high illiteracy rates mean that some farmers opt not to join groups due to the inability to associate with their educated counterparts. On the other hand, those who join the groups would not move at the same pace as the rest. As such implementing activities as a group would prove difficult. Therefore, adult literacy and education programs would greatly complement the farmer group approach to agricultural development. Poor road infrastructure in the rural district was cited as a challenge that hinders farmers to reach out to each other, to access extension services and to transport their produce to the Kampala-Mbarara Highway, and beyond. In addition, the availability of electricity would support any investments in value adding activities for those who are not able to access land.

Table 3.3: Perception of the farmer group members on the possible solutions to the challenges (n=119)

Solution	Do not agree	Not sure	Agree	Strongly agree	Total
	(-1)	0	1	2	
Infrastructural development	0	4	35	80	195
More incentives	2	4	32	81	192
Better govt policy	17	24	52	26	87
Transparency	1	12	44	62	167
More extension services	8	13	42	56	146
Democratic governance	7	36	40	36	105
Gender equality	14	27	30	48	126
Effective leadership	3	24	33	59	148
More access to information	1	29	42	47	135
Effective communication	10	31	39	39	107

Source: Survey data, June 2014

The possible solutions to these challenges from the point of view of the farmers would mostly include infrastructural development, incentives to join the groups, and group leadership values; mainly transparency and democratic governance that would re-inforce effective leadership. The weight attached to each of these are highlighted in Table 3.3 above.

Good leadership has long been recognized as one of the critical elements in the effective functioning of community organizations (Kaplan, 1996). Their organizing capabilities and ability to propose new initiatives that eventually are embraced by the entire community and transformed into community self-help projects are essential elements for promoting rural infrastructural development. Further spencer et al. 2007 notes that effective leadership could propel community based organisations into initiating local action, and emphasizes managerial leadership as being critical for the transformation of such organisations into “self-managing organization” (Spencer et al. 2007).

Table 3.4: Reasons for not joining groups (n=53)

Reasons	Do not agree	Not sure	Agree	Strongly agree	Total
	(-1)	0	1	2	
Lack of awareness	8	5	9	31	63
Poor attitude	15	8	15	15	30
Discrimination based on:					
gender	11	4	17	21	48
religion	20	9	11	13	17
political affiliation	19	9	7	18	24
age	25	13	7	8	-2
wealth status	13	17	11	12	22
Conflict within groups	12	12	7	22	39
No successful group	3	7	25	18	58

Source: Survey data, June 2014

The farmers that were not in groups also gave reasons for not joining the groups. The strongest reason was that they were not aware of the presence of the groups to join. Besides, some felt that although groups existed, they did not find a successful one that would motivate them to join. Adong *et al.* 2012 observes the need for existing farmer groups to be supported to achieve noticeable outcomes in order to attract other farmers. Some farmers, particularly women, felt they were being discriminated on the basis of gender.

4.0 Conclusion

The farmers in Sanga Sub County acknowledge the role played by farmer groups in providing agricultural inputs, extension services, technologies and credit. However, inadequate availability of land, in a situation of low levels of education that do not guarantee alternative sources of livelihood other than in agriculture, is a big challenge. In such a situation, the farmers would prefer government to provide financial support for groups to invest in alternative ventures such as value addition processes. This could be coupled with support for infrastructural development in terms of better road network and electricity. Government and other development agencies should support more adult education, create awareness about the importance of farmers joining groups, and better still support

existing groups to achieve outcomes that can motivate other farmers to join groups. Building the capacity of established groups to have good communication, effective leadership, and democratic and transparent governance, would further strengthen the role of farmer groups in propelling sustainable agricultural development.

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