Digital innovation can transform Africa’s smallholder farming

Digital innovation and policy reforms offer the greatest prospects for transforming the smallholder farming sector, SACAU president Dr Theo de Jager and CEO Mr Ishmael Sunga told delegates while presenting at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation’s Smart Farming convening recently which was also attended by philanthropist Bill Gates.

The SACAU leadership was presenting “A contextual overview of smallholder farming in sub-Saharan Africa: Constraints, Needs and Opportunities for digital innovation.” De Jager and Sunga noted that smallholder farmers (SHF) were the poorest fraternity in Sub-Saharan Africa. “The smallholder sector offers the greatest prospects to move large numbers of SHFs out of poverty,” they said, adding that “digital innovation and policy reforms offer the greatest prospects for transforming the smallholder farming sector.”

From left: Dr Theo de Jager, SACAU president, Mr Bill Gates, philanthropist, and Mr Ishmael Sunga, SACAU CEO at the at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation’s Smart Farming meeting.

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By Ishmael Sunga

May is fast approaching, and the preparations for our Annual General Meeting (AGM) which will be held on 26th May in Cape Town are in full swing. The proposed agenda has already been sent out to members, together with the audited financials for 2016 and minutes of the previous AGM. In addition, nominations for the three Board positions which will become vacant at the event have already been received.

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As mentioned in the last issue, the AGM will be preceded by two conferences which will be held on 22nd-25th May, following another conference on tenure security and agriculture transformation in the smallholder sector which will be held on 22nd-23rd May, and will be co-hosted with We Effect who are our long-standing development partner.

Each conference is expected to be officially opened by a Minister from government of RSA, and there are strong indications that both will be well attended. More updates in the next issue.

In the meantime, we continued with our advocacy work and building global relations to support agriculture and our work. In this regard, the main highlight was a meeting on “Smart Farming” that Dr De Jager and I attended in the USA which was hosted by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Global Good Fund. We had the pleasure of making the first presentation to the small group of participants that had been invited, and had the very rare opportunity to shake hands with Mr Bill Gates himself who attended the meeting. We are hopeful that this meeting will bear fruit in the near future.

We look forward to meeting some of you soon in Cape Town. Until next time!

Digital innovation can transform smallholder farming

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To do this would need the development of a new generation of farmers.

“This, coupled with doing agriculture as a business, will be critical in the agricultural transformation agenda,” said Sunga adding that Farmers’ Organisations were best positioned as the vehicle for a digital driven change.

Profile of the sector

According to SACAU, about half of the population in Sub-Sahara Africa reside in rural areas where the vast majority of the population subsist as SHFs.

“Of concern is the lack of interest in agriculture by the youth,” they noted.

These rural areas have low literacy rates. The average farm size is less than one hectare with low productivity that included yields of less than one ton per hectare. Predominantly hoe based, these farmers recorded postharvest losses of around 40%.

Marked by a high risk-low return production system, this situation is exacerbated by an inability to take advantage of existing opportunities; high vulnerability to climate changes, market fluctuations and other risks.

Smallholder farmers are restricted by lack of product of productive assets and security of tenure; limited availability and access to finance; limited availability and access to risk management facilities (e.g. insurance); lack of physical and socio-economic infrastructure; limited access to input and output markets; lack of knowledge, experience, skills and expertise; limited access to technology; underdeveloped value chains; and, lack of efficient and effective farmers’ organisations (e.g. for markets, advocacy).

Lack of investment

In addition, Africa’s policy and regulatory environment is not conducive to promoting change in the sector. There is a low level of ambition and appetite to grow and prosper and a lack of ownership of productive assets and security of tenure. There is a lack of investment in the sector, including declining gross fixed capital formation at the farm level.

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The impact of limited digital infrastructure network is deepened with the discomfort with digital technology for the older generation of smallholder farmers reflected in the low ownership of smart phones.

The leadership advocated improved access to digital infrastructure-connectivity underpinned by a conducive policy environment. In addition, improved access to extension services and the resultant access to information, knowledge, expertise and training as well as better linkages to markets and access to financing and collateral would help grow small holder farmers out of poverty.

Increased private and public sector investment as well as the development of value chains within agriculture would promote return on investment.

They noted that the continent was starting at a low benchmark. Africa’s population is young and growing fast; there is an emergence of mobile communication culture in the region with high cell-phone penetration and usage.

Opportunities

“There are clear opportunities for wider applications such as those to measure, register, monitoring and collect data within agriculture and so support further growth,” they said.

SACAU explained that these applications included area and volume measuring, mapping, monitoring, surveillance, disaster preparedness and management, early warning and risk management, investment/ resource planning and production management, farmer and land registrations, provision of banking and financial services, data harvesting, tracking, tracing, service automation, resource use intensity and efficiencies.

“There is an opportunity to organise farmers for markets and services more efficiently and effectively,” they noted.

Use of technology could support the delivery of training, knowledge, advice and information on a wide scale as well as the production of evidence-based advocacy by using quick surveys and opinion polls to gauge member input.

This could be enhanced by segregating and differentiating the smallholder sector for better targeting in service delivery.

“Agriculture is best placed in the fight against poverty due to large numbers involved and availability of agricultural assets,” they said.

“We need more efficient and effective ways of organising farmers; we need new generation of farmers’ organisations which are connected and data driven. The mobile technology revolution in sub-Saharan Africa has already paved the way for wider application in agriculture,” they added.

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Formulating Business Plan Commences

The establishment of the SACAU agri-agency as directed by the 2016 Annual General Meeting (AGM) in Swaziland is taking shape and an Agriterra mission was recently hosted to advance this. The main objective of the mission was to work with SACAU technical team in developing a five-year business plan for the agri-agency. The development of the business plan was building on the three previous missions that were conducted to 10 members of SACAU in six countries namely, Malawi, South Africa, Namibia, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe as well as the Secretariat.

The Agriterra mission comprised Mr Peter van Boekel and Mr Wil Wijtsma from Netherlands, while the SACAU team comprised Mr Ishmael Sunga, Ms Fhumulani Mashau and Mr Benito Eliasi. At the end of the mission, broader areas of intervention in the business plan were discussed and agreed upon. Also, the approach and first steps of operationalisation were agreed upon. More specifically, this looked at the services to be offered, resourcing and operational modalities. The business plan will be presented to the SACAU Board in the second or third quarter of this year.

Regional FOs and IFAD discuss progress of the SFOAP

Representatives of five (5) Regional Farmers’ Organisations (RFOs) met in Niamey, Niger to share progress in the implementation of Support to Farmers’ Organisations in Africa Programme (SFOAP).

This is a five-year programme that has been running since 2013 and is coming to an end next year, thus the review meeting was important in mapping out the way forward after the phasing out of funding.

The meeting was also attended by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) who are coordinating the support programme as well as contributing to the funding of the activities together with the European Union, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and Agence Francaise de Development (AFD).

Overall, the review concluded that the program has made progress in improving the lives of farmers in the countries where it is implemented. The capacity of farmers’ organisations (FO) to provide services to their members has also improved since 2013 to an extent that National Farmers’ Organisations (NFOs) have increased their membership and footprint in policy discussion platforms in their respective countries.

Mr Roberto Longo from IFAD applauded the collective of FOs in Africa for making tremendous achievements in such a complicated program as SFOAP. “The partnership that has developed between FOs and IFAD over the years will continue beyond the current support,” said Mr Longo. He stated that RFOs should plan to share all the achievements of the program with IFAD staff, especially those responsible for country programs in the countries where SFOAP is implemented.

In southern Africa, the beneficiaries of the programme are the Agricultural Council of Tanzania (ACT), Coalition Paysanne de Madagascar (CPM), Lesotho National Farmers’ Union (LENAFU), Swaziland National Agricultural Union (SNAU), Seychelles Farmers’ Association (SeyFA) and Namibia National Farmers’ Union (NNFU).
Two young farmers participate in seed harmonisation learning-visit in Lusaka

The Alliance for Commodity Trade in Eastern and Southern Africa (ACTESA) organised a learning visit to Lusaka under the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) Seed Harmonization Implementation Plan from 27th to 28th April 2017. The visit was designed to familiarise farmers with COMESA harmonisation procedures and status in Zambia. Participating in the visit were farmers from Malawi, South Africa, Lesotho, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Burundi, Uganda, Seychelles, Congo and Rwanda, representing both SACAU and the Eastern Africa Farmers Federation. Most of these farmers were seed growers for various seed companies in their respective countries.

Among other things, farmers were briefed on the processes of seed policy harmonisation at national and regional level. Issues of variety release, registration and post control testing as some key points in seed harmonisation were also deliberated.

The team also visited SeedCo to observe first-hand the practices of private sector on seed production. A tour was made in their labs, factory and a maize production field.

“We noted that for a variety to be used by farmers in a country, it should undergo the following processes: variety release, registration for production, seed field inspections, sampling & testing, certification, licensing of seed traders, and post control testing to assess how close seed is to the original/authentic sample,” said Mr Innocent Jumbe, one of the participants from the SACAU Young Farmers’ Forum. “We toured the seed laboratory illustrating how the key parameters in seed production are tested,” added Jumbe.

Farmers visited demonstration plots of Monsanto, SeedCo, Syngenta and ZamSeed. At these demonstrations, discussions mainly focused on how the companies are reaching out to farmers and what farmers should expect from these companies. The main concern of the farmers was on difficulties of accessing germplasm and how they can work with the seed companies from their specific countries.

Lastly, farmers highlighted the need for farmer empowerment through deliberate effort to incorporate farmers as shareholders in the seed companies and not just growers. Issues of fake seed affecting smallholder farmers was also raised by the farmers; and role of women and youth in seed production.

PAFO appreciates partners’ contribution in agricultural development

The Pan African Farmers’ Organisation (PAFO) expressed its appreciation to its development partners. The Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation (CTA) more specifically, was appreciated for its important role in the development of agriculture in the continent. Leaders of PAFO who recently met in Niamey, Niger acknowledged that CTA has been instrumental in ensuring that smallholder farmers can access relevant information on production as well as marketing of their produce.

The leaders further indicated that CTA should be applauded for facilitating knowledge sharing among farmers utilising the structures of organised agriculture in the continent. In addition, PAFO recognised and appreciated the direct technical and financial support CTA provides to farmers at continental, regional and national level and such support has led to shifting the paradigm of practicing agriculture. Through the work of CTA in Africa, there has been a broadening of horizons on technology, data, side-industries such as agritourism, education and training, research and financing. CTA has also served as a library and data center for knowledge management and sharing as well as a strategic guide to experts on agricultural development, ICTs, organisational planning and environment scanning in the sector.

Lastly, PAFO leaders expressed their hopes for the continued and strengthened relationship with CTA in years to come and called for the European Commission to continue supporting CTA to implement its activities and mandate in Africa.