Opportunities, Constraints and Innovative Approaches in Small Scale Agricultural in South Africa

6-8 August 2014

The dialogue consisted of a variety of participants involved in the small scale agricultural sector and compromised those in academia, the state, policy development and implementation, researchers and NGOs. The event was shaped by a three-stage inquiry:

1. What needs to be changed in the agricultural sector?
2. How will this be changed?
3. How will projects be expanded and multiplied?

This approach was based on the notion that, instead of constantly trying to reinvent the wheel, we should rather focus on the 'good wheels' in the country.

Three academic papers were presented as framing documents for the first session:

1. Wim van Averbek – highlighted the important issues pertaining to the idea of expanding smallholder irrigation. Van Averbek noted that preparing the land is one of the most important activities. Yet there are a number of constraints, such as capacity deficiencies, institutional problems, lack of training.
2. Micheal Aliber – engaged with agricultural development in communal areas and on land reform in South Africa. His point of departure being, "what should be done?" For Aliber, constraints tend to be "over-determined" and "all-encompassing" with little support from government. Aliber argues that we are not on the right road, nor can we use best practice models. We don't know what we want to achieve and his solution is we should be more open to experimentation and learning.
3. Ben Cousins – argued that there is no single, agreed meaning of what a smallholder farm is and that these farmers are often diverse, with massive variations in production etc. Cousins states this must be taken into account in designing policy, in particular, with regard to black farmers.

Importantly, it was noted that many types of farming do not fit the traditional mould and, for example, mixed used and communal farming serves multiple social, economic and cultural purposes. We need to re-imagine how we see farming and not focus solely on increased commercialisation. It was noted that *"agriculture has three important functions in South Africa: 1) economic, commercial activity; 2) a social/cultural activity; 3) social stabilisation in relation to movement between rural areas and the city – we don't understand this. Policy tends to favour the commercial option, we do not understand the substitution factor".* Farming remains particularly untransformed and prone to politicisation. Practitioners in KwaZulu-Natal found obstacles in working with traditional authorities and trusts, and there were additional difficulties in terms of land usage.

Of the important presentations given were those that focused on pooling resources and providing a level of stabilisation of supply. These social models and co-ops also allow for a sharing of risk between groups.

Other presentations focused on the need to develop conservation agriculture in South Africa. Grain-SA presented on how this kind of agriculture could have the added benefit of increasing soil quality

and stability on farms. Presentations were also given on making farming operations more efficient in the market and taking their businesses to the next level. This included how economy of scale allowed larger farmers better access.

It was noted that there is a lack of youth in farming. It was presented that there is a need to make farming "cool" for the youth. The average age for a farmer is now an alarming 62 years. Crucially it was argued that to become a successful dairy farmer generally takes over 10 years.

The Action Dialogue did not only focus on farming but also on broader socio-economic issues and a variety of presentations were given on these subjects. Projects such as Path out of Poverty, which operates in Goedgedacht, are expensive yet are important by building on a child's potential from before the child is born and providing nutrition, education and supplies through the child's life. Training and education is integral to a sustainable and productive agricultural sector by drawing on a range of institutions as well as through mentorship. This education should extend from a wide range of sciences and engineering to business and marketing. NGOs and universities could also provide a range of opportunities and support structures to farmers.

Presentations that followed were informed by a central objective to identify opportunities and constraints on small scale agriculture. This was focused on the experiences of practitioners primarily outside of the state. However, state structures are noted to be integral to the process as well as in the development of financing and support. Universities, farmers and the government have been able to work together on successful projects. Throughout the discussions there was a continued note that projects very rarely provided goods and services for free. A sense of ownership is noted as integral to any process.

Outside of the state, white commercial farmers could also assist – not only by imparting knowledge and skills but to actively assist in transformation. Amadlelo took transformation beyond just land reform to create opportunities in the dairy sector by creating successful black farmers as well as by creating opportunities to train to become dairy managers etc.

Actions

- Large-scale and creative interventions should look to set up models of interventions. Technology is integral to this process as is the involvement of the community.
- There needs to be a transfer of skills as well as support on a variety of levels. This should also include support from researchers, universities, practitioners and policy-makers.
- The "cookie cutter" approach in terms of policy-making cannot be used.
- Supporting leaders and individuals is imperative in achieving success.
- Policy including that of land and the NDP should be rectified and debated.
- The market is integral to a functioning system and opportunities must be promoted.
- There is a need to get the youth involved in farming as many see farming only as a fall-back option.