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# VARIABLES INFLUENCING EXTENSION WORKERS EFFICIENCY ON AGRICULTURE ENTERPRISES VENTURES

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## Abstract

Agricultural entrepreneurs play a vital role in developing economies globally. In Zimbabwe, the government has a policy that encourages the formation and promotion of agricultural enterprises. Through the Department of Agriculture & Forestry, the government has been working towards uplifting the lives of the poor through the establishment of agriculturally based enterprises. However, an investigation conducted by an independent research firm revealed that the government's support for these ventures is seriously inadequate. The report also noted that the lack of skilled and experienced extension workers undermines the government's efforts to support agricultural enterprises. It was therefore suggested that extension workers be trained to provide quality services in order to sustain and enhance the operations of these ventures.

**Keywords:** Agricultural entrepreneurs; extension services; farming; Agricultural enterprises

## Introduction

In the agricultural sector, the terms subsistence, semi- commercial, and commercial enterprises are often used to describe different types of businesses. These classifications do not clearly distinguish agricultural enterprises from SMMEs in other sectors. In Zimbabwe, farming businesses are often formed through various government and individual initiatives. The objective of these is to provide the previously disadvantaged with the opportunity to own and use productive land. Most farming enterprises face various challenges during the pre- and post- settlement phases. These include lack of

access to credit, marketing information, and value addition (Ortmann and King, 2007). They also lack proper business mentorship.

Despite these obstacles, farming enterprises are considered a cornerstone of development and job creation. They have to be built on sound foundations in order to effectively contribute to the goals of food security and economic development (Fete, 2010). It is estimated that there are about 14 million small-holders farmers in the country who can be classified as enterprises (CSD 2007, Verschoor 2003, Bienabe & Vermeulen, 2006, NDA, 2001). The formation of farming enterprises was prompted by the significant land use gaps in the country. In 2006, about 55000 white farmers owned 87% of the country's agricultural land (Bienabe & Vermeulen, 2006) compared with 17 million hectares operated by 1,2 million black farmers. The 3 to 4 percent of GDP that farming enterprises contribute to the national economy is also attributed to the large scale commercial enterprises NDA 2002, Mashotola & Darroch 2003).

It is widely known that the creation of millions of jobs through the large-scale commercial agriculture has contributed to the country's economic growth while economic linkages caused another 10.5% additional jobs outside the agricultural sector (Esterhuizen and van Rooyen; 2003, .Mashatola and Darroch 2003). In 2007, the commercial value of agriculture production in the country amounted to R76 billion, which contributed R34 billion to the gross domestic product. Apart from the above-mentioned contribution, the agro-processed products from commercial agricultural sector recorded 8.1% contribution to the total GDP (Bienabe & Vermeulen 2006).

Although the contribution of farming enterprises to the national economy is acknowledged, it is difficult to know if the majority of them have started contributing

to it. Current trends indicate that many small scale agricultural businesses are formed in order to fulfil livelihood requirements rather than commercial economic objectives (Ortmann and King, 2007). It is believed that the social orientation of communities during the time of communal land tenure led to the tradition of giving families plots of land to cultivate crops for household consumption (Fenyes & Groenewald, 1977). This practice, however, led to continued rural poverty.

The importance of SMMEs is becoming more visible in different countries. Literature has also indicated the significant role played by these businesses in different sectors (Ladzani, 1999). In the US, it is estimated that there are about 25 million small businesses that are contributing to the country's economic growth (Ladzani & van Vuuren, 2002:153 Scarborough & Zimmerer 1996 Longenecker, Moore & Petty, 2003:9). According to Ladzani (1999), the strong SMME sectors of different countries have contributed to their respective economies' growth. In Japan, the SMME accounts for the bulk of the country's business establishment, which provides vital support for the country's regional and employment policies. In Taiwan, the same SMME accounts for almost all of the nation's GDP (Annual Report, 1983 Ladzani & Van Vuuren, 2002:153). In South Africa, the National Small Business Act of 1996 was enacted following the White Paper on the National Strategic Plan for the Development and promotion of Small Business. According to the (ASCCI, 2007), 95% of the businesses in the country are SMEs. In South Africa, entrepreneurs contribute about 50% of the country's total employment figure. They contribute about 35% to the nation's gross domestic product.

Although the contribution of the farming SMME sector has been recorded in other sectors, it has not been identified. This may be due to the informal nature of the farming

industry and the lack of records keeping. Another reason why the SMME's are not widely known is that they do not have a national database to track their activities and economic status. This could create various challenges for different sectors to develop effective models. The question that needs to be asked is whether the extension services are well-equipped to deal with the increasing number of farming enterprises. If they fail to do so, this could affect the emergence of new knowledge institutions. Various researchers have identified various factors that can affect the productivity of agricultural SMME's (Pender, 2001 and Place, 2000). These factors include the lack of access to sustainable markets, the adequate capacity of extension workers, and the establishment of structures within the SMMEs.

## Research Method

The study was a three-year (starting in 2019 and ending in 2021) longitudinal study that was conducted in Zimbabwe. It involved face-to-face interviews with beneficiaries. The study was carried out using self-completion questionnaires that were designed to collect data on farming SMMEs. The literature review was conducted to gather lessons from past experiences. The study analyzed various government reports on farming. It also assessed the various programs and policies related to farming. A participatory rapid appraisal method was then used to collect fresh data on farming SMMEs. The data was then collected through a non-probability sampling strategy to identify the farm operators. All extension workers throughout the identified provinces were encouraged to participate. The individuals who were not able to complete the survey were also excluded. A focus group was then organized to determine the informants' backgrounds. Groups of key informants (30) from different backgrounds were identified and consulted. Focus group sessions (FGS) were held (50 sessions were successfully

arranged), preceded by presentations by main researchers. This was followed by extensive discussion and analysis. A random sample of 200 extension workers (both male and female) was used in this study. The sessions were followed by an extensive analysis and discussion.

## Results and Discussion

The following factors were found to influence extension service delivery in the pre- and post-settlement phases:

### Human capital status of extension workers

Human capital theory states that education and training boost agricultural productivity through the development of farm workers, who are capable of acquiring and adapting new technologies. Human capital development is regarded as one of the most important elements in the development of agriculture. It has been stated that investing in human capital can lead to higher social returns (Pender, 2000).

The educational levels of the male and female extension officers in the sample are illustrated in Figure 1.

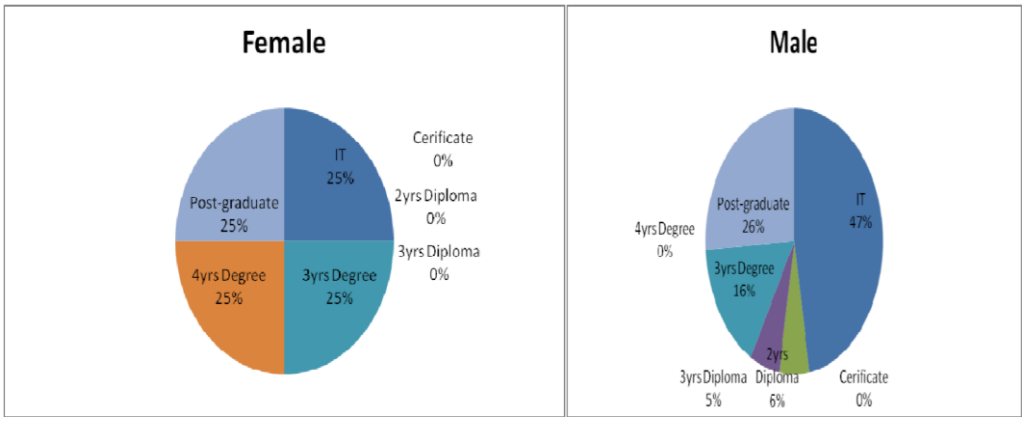


**Figure 1: Education levels of male and female extension workers**

More women than men are involved in agriculture and have a higher proportion of four year degree qualifications. More female extension workers (25%) have three year

degree qualifications than their male counterparts (16%). Some male extension workers' highest qualifications were diplomas; this was not the case with any female extension workers in the randomly selected sample. The respondents were also asked if their training was adequate for their job. The results revealed that female and male extension officers were satisfied with their educational status. The respondents noted that their educational level was poor. This suggests that they may not be able to effectively serve the needs of the emerging farmers. The post-settlement phases are also expected to have a challenging time for extension officers. Aside from providing support, they also need to develop a comprehensive knowledge about agriculture.

**Exposure of extension officers to management, marketing, training and infrastructure development.**

Various factors such as management, marketing, and training, play an important role in the success of any business enterprise, regardless of its size or complexity (Ortmann and King, 2007, Nell and Napier, 2006). The various skills needed by emerging farmers should be imparted to them through extension services. This can be done through the management, marketing, and training of extension workers.

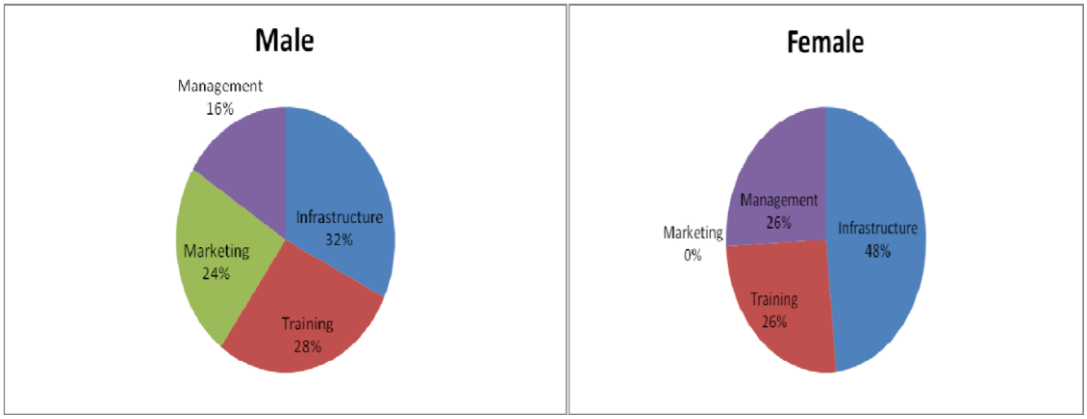


**Figure 2: Male and female extension workers' insights on management, marketing, training and infrastructure as key requirements for effective extension services**

The importance of extension workers' skills in handling various tasks and responsibilities in agriculture has been acknowledged by the public. This suggests that the facilities and training needed to improve these skills are very important in sustaining productive enterprises. Only 16% and 26% of male and female respondents respectively consider the management qualifications of extension workers as adequate. This indicates that the skills of these individuals may not be widely used once the farm SMME has been established. Not having the proper marketing knowledge and insight is considered as adequate for women and male extension workers. This suggests that they need more exposure in the marketing process. The majority of respondents consider the training of extension workers as inadequate. It is therefore important that the training levels of these individuals are increased. Despite the lack of funds, the infrastructure for extension workers is still not adequate to support their activities. As a result, only 25% of the respondents have the capacity to handle various aspects of farm operations. This suggests that the capacity of these workers should be strengthened so they can provide effective services to the farming community.

**Membership of associations**

Professional associations are vital to the success of professionals in South Africa. The SASAE was established in 1966 to promote scientific and academic activities in agriculture. It is very important that extension workers keep up with the latest developments in their field by becoming a member of professional associations. These groups provide members with access to various resources and updates. More male (72%) than female (28%) extension officers belong to associations. In addition, female have shown a superior involvement in commodity association than the male counterpart. They participation in other association also showed similar trend.

According to these results, more exposure of association activities to female extension officers would be very helpful.

**Table 1: Membership of association for both male and female extension workers**

| Membership of association | Gender | Membership Status | Percentages (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| PA | Male | GS | 15 |
| | | PS | 57 |
| | Female | GS | 10 |
| | | PS | 11 |
| CA | Male | GS | 0 |
| | | PS | 0 |
| | Female | GS | 3 |
| | | PS | 2 |
| Other | Male | GS | 0 |
| | | PS | 0 |
| | Female | GS | 2 |
| | | PS | 0 |

**Keys**: **PA= Professional Association, CA=Commodity Association, GS= Good Standing, PS= Poor Standing**

## Attendance of capacity building initiatives

In addition to being able to produce and improve farm productivity, extension workers also need to attend various workshops and conferences to enhance their analytical skills. IFPRI (2005: 3) referred to capacity building as an effort to generate knowledge, skills and expertise in order to enhance analytical capacity that may assist in increasing agricultural productivity and sustenance. This is where extension workers can connect with other individuals and gain valuable experience in various fields. It is also important that they attend and organize these fora.

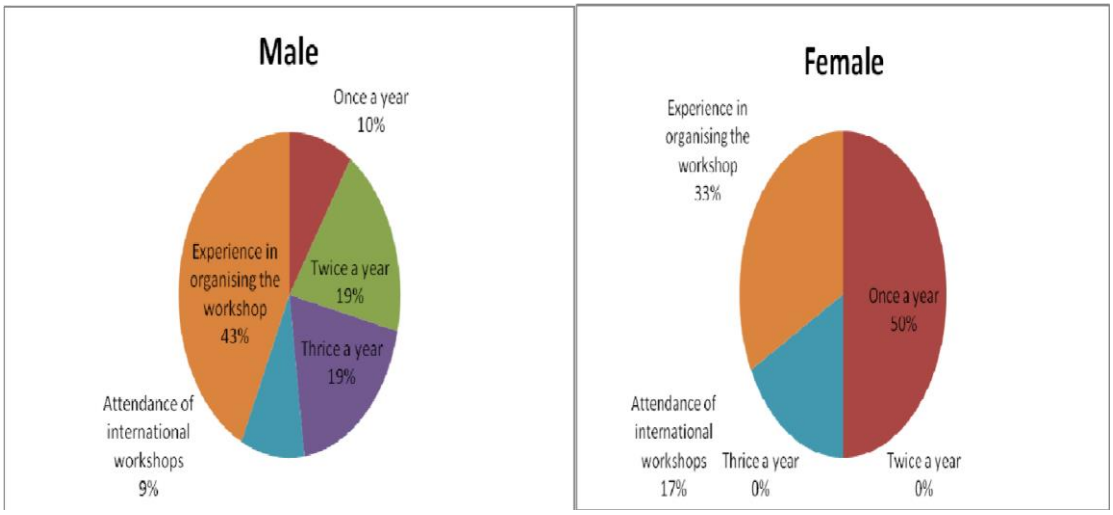


**Figure 3: Frequency of male and female extension workers' attendance of local, international workshops/symposia/conferences and experience in organising workshops/conferences /symposia**

In this study both males and female extension workers have reasonable experience in organising workshops (Males:43%; females:33%). However, more females (50%) attend conferences once a year than their male counterparts (10%). Attendance of international workshops is generally poor (Males:9%; females:17%).

## Conclusion and Recommendation

Many extension workers fail to effectively utilize the marketing skills necessary to help their clients obtain sustainable markets. This deficiency will negatively affect their ability to provide quality produce to their clients. According to the random sampling of farm extension workers, the skills needed to effectively manage and develop farming ventures are inadequate. This could affect the viability of some of their businesses. Membership of extension workers' associations is generally adequate for males. Only a few female members belong to commodity and professional associations. It is the duty of extension workers to regularly update themselves on the latest trends and techniques in their profession in order to transfer these to their clients.

It is very clear that extension workers must be well-equipped with the necessary skills in order to assist government and support emerging entrepreneurs in agriculture. Aside from having the necessary skills, the individuals also need to be capacitated before they are allowed to establish their businesses on the new land. This will help avoid the collapse of their enterprises. Aside from being able to produce and manage food, extension workers also need to be trained on marketing and production skills. Mentoring and evaluation are also necessary in order to ensure the success of SMMEs. A good management information system is also important for the success of SMMEs. This can help the workers keep track of their various tasks and activities. Through the post-settlement phase, extension workers can play a critical role in supporting local farming communities. Lack of internal organization and inadequate training are some of the factors that contribute to the poor delivery of extension services.

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