AVAILABILITY OF AGRICULTURAL INFORMATION IN KENYA:
INFORMATION NEEDS AND INFORMATION SEEKING HABITS OF THE
KENYAN FARMER AND AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION AGENT

by

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Abstract. Agriculture is the mainstay of Kenya economy. 35 million people need to be fed by year 2,000. "Renewed rapid economic growth" is vital if the target average Gross Domestic Product growth rate of 5.6% per annum is to be achieved. Arable areas are cultivated thus calling for intensification of farming and optimum exploitation of arid/semi-arid areas. Increased food and cash crop production ensures good health, increased income for the rural farming community (who account for 82.8% of Kenya's population (1979 Census). Government supports establishment of information systems in the country. Agricultural Information Centre for example was set in 1966 to meet the information needs of the farmer. Computer technology is being used by Kenya Agricultural Documentation Centre (in-putting centre for FAO's AGRIS information system) and Ministry of Agriculture library. They access AGRICOLA and KIT (abstracts on tropical Agriculture) on CD-ROM. The role of other agricultural related information centres have been noted e.g. ILCA, ICRAF, Kenya Agricultural Research Institute, Farmers Training Centres etc. 5,925 extension frontline workers have to be equipped with technical information for dissemination to 2,747,951 farm households. The high illiteracy rate within the farming community calls for re-packaging of information into other medias e.g. Audio-visuals and informal information communication. Bibliographic control and resource sharing in information is encouraged. Constraints e.g. on low staff farmer ratio (currently at 1:622 with wide variations over districts) are discussed.
Introduction

A community deprived of information is at the same time deprived of any possibility of reaching the starting point for any form of progress. In Kenya, the challenge that information disseminators have at stake is that of developing the economy by alleviating the "information poverty" present within the country. This poverty is not caused by lack of information but more by its inaccessibility. The adoption of the UAP (Universal Availability of Publications) is essential for Kenya.

Kenyan population has a primary task of building the nation into a modern nation. Information in this regard is an integral part of this development. The Government's realisation of this fact has been fully exemplified in its current development plan (1989 - 1993) thus; "information and communication are resources which when organised and utilized appropriately greatly enhance socio-economic cultural scientific and technological development". In the same document, the Government has promised that "a broad policy frame regarding the co-ordination and development of the information infrastructure will be undertaken eventually leading to a clearly articulated national information and informatics policy". Noting that "effective information and communication can only take place in an environment of literate Mwananchi (citizen)", the Kenya Government have vowed to put more emphasis on adult literacy programmes.

Kenya is essentially dependent in its economy on agriculture. It is the major foreign exchange earner for the country and provides food for local consumption. It is the main source of income for the rural farming community who account for 32.3% of Kenya's population (1979 census). The value of output of small scale and large scale farmers is about the same. Equity in information provision is therefore a must for both user groups.

It is estimated that 35 million people will need to be
fed by the year 2000 (sessional paper no. 1, 1986) and the annual population growth rate will have gone up to 4%. The Government has in this paper called for a "renewed rapid economic growth" if the target average Gross Domestic Product growth rate of 5.6 per annum is to be achieved.

Arable areas are already cultivated: thus calling for intensification of farming and optimum exploitation of arid/semi-arid areas which constitute two thirds of the total land's surface.

The role of information as an indispensable resource for Kenya development has been fully recognized thereby resting an extremely rigorous responsibility to the information disseminators.

1. Agricultural Information Infrastructure

It is estimated that one quarter million agricultural items are published in the world annually. To be able to have access to these items, cohesive collections of information resources will be required. The information units (library and information services including documentation centres) in each country have to organise their materials in such a way that their respective clientele have easy access to them.

1.1 Ministry of Agriculture Information Services Branch

The branch consists of the library, Agricultural Information Centre (AIC) and the Kenya Agricultural Documentation Centre (KADOC). This branch is one of the five agricultural extension services branches. It gives vital information support service to both the technical and the administrative line of the Ministry. Its services permeates vertically way down to the farmer thus;

(i) The library was incepted in 1907 and currently holds a stock of over 170,000 volumes of books and bound periodicals, and a total of 233 current periodical titles. The library branches totalled to 92 until recently (1988) when the 21 research stations were moved out of the
Ministry and placed under the management of KARI (Kenya Agricultural Research Institute). All the others are in the Farmers Training Centres, Agricultural Training Institutes, Provincial and District Agricultural Offices. It serves the Ministry staff and also provides reference and information service to the entire public.

(ii) A.I.C was incepted in 1966 to specifically meet the information needs of the farmer. As noted earlier, the Kenyan farming community like in most developing countries is predominantly illiterate. It is therefore necessary to provide their information in both book and non-book media. AIC is sub divided into four functional units thus:

(a) The information unit which identifies, collects, processes and disseminates agricultural information

(b) The publications unit which deals with the technical production and publication of printed material such as basic booklets, charts and handbooks for use by the frontline extension workers

(c) Training unit which organises courses on communication skills for the extension staff

(d) Visual aids unit which caters for the production of visual aids e.g. films, tape slides and video recordings.

A.I.C library which provides the back up literature has a collection of over 70 volumes of books and research reports. It also houses the films, tape/slides, pamphlets and charts.

A.I.C distributes publications (usually pamphlets in both English and the national language - Kiswahili) to farmers at subsidized cost and free to the agricultural extension workers; operates mobile cinema vans especially during the Agricultural society of Kenya shows; makes extensive loans of films to local institutions; holds
conferences and training programmes on extension communication for the extension workers.

(iii) KADOC was incepted in 1978 to collect, organise & disseminate the Kenya Agricultural literature (mainly non-conventional research reports) for use by the agricultural clientele in Kenya, and the world at large. It is the inputting centre for the FAO's International Information System for the Agricultural Sciences and Technology (AGRIS). It receives the AGRIS Index i.e. the AGRINDEX in return. KADOC publishes the Kenya Agricultural Abstracts (KAAS) in current and retrospective series. Back up literature is available to all users on microfiche and paper format.

An SDI (Selective Dissemination of Information) is done for individuals and groups e.g. those running specific programmes. The sources used for this service include the KAAS, the AGRINDEX, AGRICOLA and KIT abstracts databases on CD-ROM. The last two together with the computer were provided by CTA (Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Co-operation). Both KADOC and the Ministry Library are hoping to purchase and pay an annual subscription to the Commonwealth Agricultural Bureau International (CABI)'s database on CD-ROM at a subsidized price of £560 for Vol. I (1984 - 1986) and £1125 for Vol. II (1987 - 89). The annual subscription rate will be £560 p.a. This is less than 10% of the total publication's budget which unfortunately is all taken up by the journal subscriptions. More funds will have to be solicited for as this database is very comprehensive and useful for Kenya agriculture.

1.2 Ministry of Livestock Development Information Units

The staff in this ministry are served by the ministry of Agriculture information units as the two ministries were until recently one ministry. The Veterinary Research Laboratory library has branches in the Provincial District and Divisional levels.
1.3 Government Parastatal Libraries

KARI library is a good example with 89,000 items in stock and a total of 520 current periodical titles. Among other services, KARI provides a literature service based on the photocopy of selected articles from a pre-circulated contents pages bulletin.

1.4 Academic agricultural libraries

These serve the Universities' colleges and faculties of agriculture and do co-operate highly with other agricultural information units for access to their materials.

1.5 The Agriculture and Veterinary Oriented International Organizations

Kenya hosts over eight of the above noted organizations. Their well stocked libraries and documentation units are available for reference and information service to the public. ICRAF (International Council for Research in Agroforestry) is a good example. It has for instance assisted several information units to adopt the UNESCO's CDS ISIS programme thereby forming the local KENISIS group.

2. The Peasant Farmer Information Needs

The farm households currently stand at 2,707,951 while the extension staff farmer ration ranges from 1:86 to 1:1738 and an average of 1:622 (sessional paper ... services Division; 1st Draft 1988). The farmers though predominantly illiterate are not necessarily ignorant and uninformed. They need to be continuously fed with current information on new farming technologies. The role of the frontline extension worker in this regard is very crucial as he is the intermediary between the proliferation of technical information and the farmer. The success of the vertical flow of information from the researcher to the farmer and vice versa will be determined by the performance of the frontline extension worker.

The farmers need information on experimental work which
have to be applied on the farm e.g. on variety trials, rotational experiments, soil conservation, farm implements etc. They also require information on farm inputs e.g. fertilizers, pesticides, fungicides, credit facilities and commodity market prices.

2.1 The peasant farmer: sources of information

The National Extension Programme (NEP) of the Ministry of Agriculture may not be perfect but needs to be commended for fostering agricultural development in Kenya. The planning and monitoring of the NEP is done by the Agricultural Extension services Division. The agricultural extension operations are co-ordinated at the District, down to the Divisional level where the Agricultural Assistants and the Junior Agricultural Assistants work hand in hand with the farmer at the grassroot level. The methods used for extension include

(i) monthly workshops and tours
(ii) fortnightly training sessions
(iii) use of contact farmers (selected farms where surrounding farmers meet to learn useful information/technologies which they can later apply on their farms)
(iv) adaptive trials - (held to verify recommendations from research e.g. on varieties spacing fertilizer and chemical rates etc.)
(v) professional groups (in each province to plan and advise on farm trials and act as resource groups)
(vi) field days/demonstrations
(vii) Agricultural Shows
(viii) Local women groups provide very good forums for extension.

Finally oral information in indigenous languages coupled with programmes in audio/visual aids and frequent radio broadcasts are very instrumental in furthering extension in Kenya. The library and information units assist by stocking their libraries especially those within the Farmers Training Centres with both the book and non-book
3. The frontline extension agent information needs

This group basically needs the same information as noted above for the farmer. They however need to know more about the farmer himself and be able to have the needed communication skills to pass on the appropriate information to the farmer thus they need information on

(i) the Government policies on rural development strategies
(ii) climatic conditions of the ecological zone to be covered
(iii) socio-economic conditions and the cultural beliefs of the community.

CONCLUSION

In her study on "information for women in food production" (Mathangani 1989), it was "confirmed that the contribution of information to development is acknowledged". The farmers who the study noticed are predominatly women are aware of their need for current information on agricultural practices.

Future packaging of information for the front line extension worker and the farmer will be more facilitated by the use of the new technology e.g. the CD-ROM because as (Kinney 1988) notes, "it may have a significant impact on the flow of relevant information into sub-saharan African countries at a level where it can be used or re-packaged to directly or indirectly benefit rural people".

As far as selling and marketing of information is concerned it is almost impossible to charge for a library service in Kenya. This may have a very negative effect on the users who have to be wooed to use the libraries and information services. At this early stage we may have to engage on promotion and publicity of the existing information services until when we get a stronger
grip of our users. After that we can think of charging for some particular services.

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