Establishing a successful dairy community development program: the challenges and pitfalls

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ABSTRACT

The awarding of a research grant designed to investigate the limitations to dairy animal productivity in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities in a country totally foreign to the successful applicants presents many challenges. This paper highlights some of the key challenges that have been arisen throughout the 6 years of our dairy extension program awarded through the Agriculture Sector Linkages Program established as a co-operative agreement between the Pakistani and Australian governments. Successful sustainable programs depend on the identification of the right partner organizations and staff to conduct the program and then the keeping of accurate records to measure and report on the success of farmers to both sponsors and host organizations.

Key words: Development, Extension services, Small holder farmer, Dairy, Challenges

INTRODUCTION

Pakistan is heavily dependent on an agrarian rural based economy, with livestock contributing 50% to the country’s economy (Pakistan Economic Survey, 2006). The predominance of villages are populated with farmers owning 3-10 dairy animals, with much of the milk consumed domestically, while a small proportion is on sold into either the local community or to milk buyers operating in a marketing chain culminating in the sale of milk in large cities. However Pakistan’s standing as the world’s 4th largest milk producer relies on production of less than 6 litres per day per animal from over 50 million buffalo and cattle. Our aim was to improve the productivity of the national herd.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Forming the right partnerships: As an Australian dairy scientist funded to investigate ways of “revolutionising” the commercial acumen of these farmers through co-operation with organizations already working in the field with them, it was difficult to know where to start. Governmental institutions like the state or federal Livestock Ministries are the most likely choices on offer from governments. The advantage of working with a large bureaucracy like a state Livestock Ministry which employs hundreds of veterinary officers servicing the needs of millions of dairy farmers is that there is a structure to work with. Furthermore there is scope for extension of their activities as only about 20% of small-holder farmers receive any assistance at all.
The disadvantages are that the organization is most often hampered by inertia based on a career structure for the veterinary extension staff that offers no incentive to excel. Some officers can wait for as long as 20 years for promotion beyond base grade. There is no mechanism for promotion based on performance. Thus engaging these staff in a new performance based paradigm presents a real challenge.

The other issue relates to the management of finance, which once sent to the ministry to fund the project, becomes difficult to access because of the bureaucratic process of approval of expenditure. Delays in fund release can cause major delays in progress with program inception. Working with NGO’s is an ideal objective, but their activities can change markedly over a short period: therefore there is no continuity in support. Similarly smaller co-operative companies have their own commercial objectives which often do not align with the welfare of farmers.

Co-operation with other aid agencies
Some countries are awash with funding from a range of international agencies most often with a motive to service the political agendas of countries funding the organization. Their objectives most often overlap, and yet because their funding is dependent on the delivery of a work program decided at the point of signing of contracts, there is little incentive or scope for co-operation of sharing of resources between projects. In some cases the program can be designed by one consultancy and then implemented by an entirely independent organization which might not be able to deliver effectively.

Shifting objectives
The political agendas of governments can change and therefore the emphases of projects can also change in line with these. A sudden push for a “pro poor” approach to aid, for example, means that flexibility needs to be built into every project to meet the needs of an ever changing political environment.

Choosing the right staff
The rule of thumb is to choose young resilient expatriate staff to immerse directly into the environment in which the project is to be implemented. Their decision making processes will not be influenced by previous project management experience. These staff then need to have an advisory group who visit on a frequent basis to provide some guidance with program direction and also to assure senior bureaucrats in partner organizations that back-up assistance is never far away. Then newly trained local graduates who will be compliant with the aims of the project need to be chosen carefully. Having the right staff in place in both the operational team and among the partner organizations is critical to success. Once local staff are trained expatriat staff need to withdraw to oversee progress with the project from afar. These staff will also need to visit the project team on a frequent basis to monitor progress and offer further suggestions.

Keeping good records
The key to success is to measure the rate of success in the targeted farming communities through accurate record keeping. This involves the development of a comprehensive survey that will provide the baseline for on farm productivity and community development. This must be constructed carefully as the survey can be conducted only once. Thereafter accurate on farm record keeping is required to measure progress. The data base needs to be maintained constantly and analysed at fixed times to ascertain responses to the extension activity. There is a need for
constant reviewing of the project approach to ensure that the financial investment is reaping the return demanded by the funding agency.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Project sustainability: the key to success
Results can only be evaluated after the sustainability and outcomes of the project can be measured. Success is dependent on developing a working relationship with farmers and collaborating partners based on trust. Rather than offering incentives to farmers to ensure their engagement, a more effective mechanism is to initiate a project with sentinel farmers who are the innovators in any community. These leaders will soon demonstrate the virtues of the project if it is implemented correctly and others will then follow. Engagement with women and children as well as the local school teacher is a critical component for success with extension. Above all it is essential that the project develops to keep all partners happy. This might mean adjusting the project aims to accommodate the wishes of local industry leaders. In the end it is critical that a cadre of workers in the partner organizations is left with funding provided from within their organization or from farmers to carry on the project after external aid funding ceases. Persistence combined with flexibility together with accurate data recording and reporting will always pay off in the long run.

CONCLUSION

Successful extension activities require total involvement of project staff with the communities they are working with. The nature of extension material has to vary to ensure maximum engagement of the whole family. At an organisational level it is essential that an established network of extension staff is in place to ensure that success with the project extends well beyond the period of funding for the program. The leaders of the program must be working cohesively and preferably are from the current generation of young graduates who are the future of the industry we are assisting.

REFERENCE