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ABSTRACT

This research is to assess the role of opinion leaders in extension work in relation to farming. The purpose is to establish the extent opinion leaders encourage agricultural production for the achievement of food security. This is because opinion leaders are seen as helpful in addressing challenges in the community. There is satisfaction with opinion leaders that can assist extension workers to deliver and are seen as important in the provision of extension services to farmers. The result of the research is that opinion leaders play a role in extension work in Luri County and the main role is in linking extension workers to farmers. In general, farmers are satisfied with the role of opinion leaders. It is recommended that there should be more consultation between opinion leaders and extension workers with further research to be carried out to establish the extent to which the role of opinion leaders in extension work is effective in increasing yields for self-reliance in food production.

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Keywords: opinion leaders, extension worker, farmers, community, food security, poverty.

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I. INTRODUCTION

This research paper covers the role of opinion leaders and extension work in Luri County in Jubek State, South Sudan. It is on the extent of how opinion leaders are linking farmers to

extension workers in order for farmers to adopt innovations that increase production to achieve food security.

Opinion leaders are members of the social system in which they exert their influence and when compared with their followers, opinion leaders are more exposed to all forms of external communication, are more cosmopolite, have to some extent higher social status, and are more innovative (Rogers, 1983). On the other hand, extension work is seen as the public provision of agricultural advice and support to farmers (Howell, 1986, pp.213 – 218). Extension is to help farmers acquire knowledge related to certain solutions to problems and their consequences so the farmers can act on possible alternatives (Van den Ban and Hawkins, 1996). For extension services, it is the role of the extension worker to bring about change among farmers (Oakley and Garforth, 1985). An extension worker seeks out and encourages people to change their traditional attitudes towards development and helps them achieve a better living standard (MacDonald and Hearle, 1984). However, the challenge is that in Sub-Saharan Africa extension workers are all too often sad figures abandoned with little or no support, infrequently supervised, with no messages worth passing on to farmers and with few incentives to get on with the work (Wiggins, 1986, pp.99 – 106). Sub-Saharan Africa is perhaps the only region of the world that has not significantly increased productivity of food crops among its population of small scale farmers and the reasons given include poor infrastructures and shortage of skilled personnel (Zaria and Amotayo, 1997, pp.123 – 138).

In any extension organization, there will be only a small number of trained, professional extension workers within any region, with responsibility for thousand of farmers (Oakley and Garforth, 1985). According to Oakley and Garforth, the solution is for extension workers to seek out and enlist the support of local people who have leadership qualities or influence within the area because such local people can assume responsibility for certain activities in the worker's absence by assisting directly in the spread of new ideas and practices by demonstrating them in their fields. This seems to suggest that opinion leaders can be people with qualities that will likely help in the spread of extension messages in dissemination of improved cultivation methods to farmers to increase production in the area.

The hypothesis to examine is that opinion leaders have no role in extension work in Luri County in Jubek State, South Sudan and the purpose of the research is to determine the extent of the role of opinion leaders in extension work.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

Some of the objectives of the research are as follows:

1. To assess the extent opinion leaders are involved in extension work in Luri County,
2. To establish what main role opinion leaders play in extension work, and
3. To establish the level of satisfaction of farmers with opinion leaders.

Research questions

The main research questions are:

1. Do opinion leaders have a role to play in extension work in Luri County?
2. What do opinion leaders mainly do if they have a role to play in extension work?
3. How are opinion leaders important in extension work?

Justification of the research

This research is justified in order to increase knowledge and understanding of the role opinion leaders play in extension work. It is with the aim of development of appropriate strategies in encouraging opinion leaders to get involved in extension work for the success of extension programme. The results of the research and discussion can serve as a step for further research in what has not been seen as covered in this research on the role of opinion leaders in extension work. In addition, this research is likely to be helpful in the assessment of the role played by opinion leaders in development. Finally, this research is to add knowledge to the existing literature on opinion leaders with reference to agricultural development for food security and reduction of poverty.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Various research methods have been used to collect and analyze data on the role of opinion leaders in extension work. The selection of the research area has been made and the criteria of selection of the area established. The research methodology includes orientation visits to the area, semi-structured interviews with key informants and a questionnaire survey of a sample of farmers.

Luri County in Jubek State in South Sudan has been selected as the research area to collect data on the role of opinion leaders in extension work. This is because the government is carrying out a number of demonstration farms in the area and the surrounding communities consist mainly of farmers.

A visit was made to the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries and Animal Resources in Jubek State. The purpose of the visit was to present the research proposal and to get permission in order to carry out the research in Luri County. The research proposal was accepted with an acknowledgement that it was relevant for strategic planning of an extension programme.

A preliminary visit was made to Luri County for firsthand knowledge of the area. The county authorities were positive and pledged cooperation. The research started with interviews of key informants in the area for primary data. Thereafter, a questionnaire was administered to a sample of 50 farmers for their opinions on the role of opinion leaders in extension work in Luri County.

Limitations in the research

There were challenges in the field during the research in Luri County. Some of the challenges include the following:

1. There was a problem of moving from house to house and from farm to farm in search of farmers for the questionnaire survey when people were not found at the time,
2. Extreme hot days limited movement in the area, and
3. Respondents wanted to be paid in order to provide information because of the assumption that the research was a project to benefit the local community.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Key informants in Luri County said opinion leaders were important in extension work. They concluded that opinion leaders linked extension with farmers in improving production for self-reliance. However, it was not clear to what extent did opinion leaders play a role in extension work. The results of the questionnaire survey of the sample of farmers may shed light on the extent opinion leaders play a role in extension work among farmers in the area.

When dealing with a sample the interest is in proportions because it is to estimate the proportions in the total population (Rowntree, 1981). Numerical data often need to be condensed into a more suitable form before they are of much value in a statistical investigation (Bryars, 1983). Nevertheless, actual figures are necessary for the precise specification of the frequency of

occurrence of anything and such figures are obtained from a selected sample (Langley, 1968).

In the questionnaire survey 68 per cent of the sample is male and 32 per cent female. The result of the survey shows that there are also female farmers in Luri County. Like men, women in Sub-Saharan Africa participate in various cultivation tasks such as sowing, weeding, clearing the fields and transporting produce from the fields (Savane, 1986, pp. 124 – 132). Many women are farmers in their own right, either because there is no man living in the family throughout the year or because women in some societies have their own land and their own crops for which they are responsible (Oakley and Garforth, 1985). This research confirms that there are women who are also farmers in Luri County which suggests that their opinions on the role of opinion leaders in extension work may also count.

The result of the survey by age group shows that 38 per cent are in the age group of 15 – 35 years old, 44 in 36 – 65 and 18 per cent are over 65 years old. This suggests that the majority of farmers, 82 per cent, is in the working age group and seems physically fit in sustaining production for household food security. Only 18 per cent of the farmers who are over 65 years old may be too old to work in the fields with the likely resultant low productivity.

On marital status, the majority of farmers, 84 per cent, are married and only 16 per cent are single. This suggests that the majority of farmers may have sufficient farm labor as family members are likely to contribute labor for farm work to increase production for self-reliance.

The survey on literacy shows that 56 per cent of the farmers are literate while 44 per cent are illiterate. This seems to show that by a narrow margin the majority of farmers are literate. However, on the national level the majority of people, 73 per cent, are illiterate and only 23 per cent are literate (Southern Sudan Centre for Census, Statistics and Evaluation, 2010). This

seems to suggest that the literacy rate in Luri County is above the national average.

Asked whether opinion leaders have a role to play in extension work, the answer is 100 per cent in the affirmative. When asked again of what is the most important role opinion leaders play in extension work, the majority of respondents, 86 per cent, are of the opinion that the most important role is that of linking extension workers to farmers, 12 percent view the most important role as that of advising extension workers on farming problems and 2 percent view early adoption of improved farming practices as the most important role. The result of the survey suggests that opinion leaders have a significant role to play in extension work in the dissemination of innovations to farmers to increase production for food security.

The majority of those surveyed, 74 per cent, are of the opinion that opinion leaders interact with extension workers once or more per month, 2 per cent think interaction between opinion leaders and extension workers is once in 1 – 3 months and 8 per cent think once in 4 – 6 months. Only 16 per cent of those surveyed do not see any interaction between opinion leaders and extension workers. According to the survey it can be concluded that 84 per cent of the respondents are of the opinion that there is some sort of interaction between opinion leaders and extension workers. This seems to confirm the role played by opinion leaders in extension work in Luri County.

On the capacity of opinion leaders the survey shows that the majority of respondents, 74 per cent, consider opinion leaders to have a good capacity to provide advice, 6 consider capacity satisfactory and 4 per cent of the respondents consider that capacity of opinion leaders to be excellent. However, 16 per cent of respondents consider the capacity of opinion leaders to provide advice as poor. In all, the majority of respondents in the survey, 84 per cent, are positive about the capacity of opinion leaders in providing advice to farmers. According to Rogers (1983), opinion

leaders are individuals who lead in influencing opinions of others about innovations.

Asked how they are satisfied with the role of opinion leaders in extension work, the majority of respondents, 82 per cent, simply say they are satisfied, 4 per cent are very satisfied and 14 per cent are not satisfied at all with the role of opinion leaders in extension work. This research seems to confirm that the majority of respondents, 86 per cent, are satisfied with the role of opinion leaders in extension work. This suggests a confirmation of the significant role opinion leaders play in extension work in the effort to improve farming in Luri County.

The survey on the attention of extension workers paid to opinion leaders shows that 38 per cent of respondents consider that extension workers pay a great deal of attention, 56 per cent pay only a little and 6 per cent consider extension workers hardly pay any attention to opinion leaders. It seems the majority of respondents, 94 per cent, consider that in one way or the other extension workers pay attention to opinion leaders. This again seems to confirm the significant role opinion leaders play in extension work.

On the extent of consultation between extension workers and opinion leaders, the result of the survey shows that 20 per cent of the respondents consider that extension workers always consult with opinion leaders, 70 per cent consider that sometimes there is consultation and 10 per cent consider there is no consultation at all between extension workers and opinion leaders. It shows that 90 per cent of the respondents consider that there is consultation between extension workers and opinion leaders. This clearly suggests that opinion leaders have a role in extension work in the area.

In the survey the majority of respondents, 88 per cent, agree that opinion leaders have a role to play in extension work in the rural areas, 10 per cent strongly agree and 2 per cent strongly disagree. Once again the result seems to confirm that the overwhelming majority of respondents, 98 per

cent, agree that opinion leaders have a role in extension work. This clearly seems to confirm the significant role of opinion leaders in extension work in increasing production for food security in Luri County in Jubek State, South Sudan.

Finally, on the improvement of the role of opinion leaders in extension work, 50 per cent of the respondents suggest training and financial support to opinion leaders, 30 per cent motivational incentives and 20 per cent of the respondents suggest assistance with the mobility of opinion leaders. It seems that the role of opinion leaders in extension work is being taken seriously with the majority of respondents suggesting training and financial support, and support of some kind. This may be because opinion leaders are the nearest and easiest source of agricultural information to other farmers (Shekara et al., 2016).

V. CONCLUSION

The hypothesis was that opinion leaders did not have a role with reference to extension work in Luri County in Jubek State, South Sudan. The purpose of the research was therefore to determine the extent of the role of opinion leaders in extension work.

The result of the research seems to confirm that opinion leaders play a significant role in extension work in Luri County and the main role is in linking extension workers to farmers. In addition, the farmers are satisfied with the role of opinion leaders in extension work in the area.

In conclusion, the most important role of opinion leaders considered in extension work, is linking extension workers to farmers in realizing agricultural development, achievement of food security and reduction of poverty.

5.1 Recommendation for further research

Further research is recommended with a larger sample and a wider area for possible increase in reliability in confirming the extent opinion leaders have a role to play in extension work in

dissemination of innovations to farmers to increase production for self-reliance. Further research is also recommended on problems that may occur with the role of opinion leaders in extension work. This is in order to increase the understanding of problems of the role of opinion leaders in agricultural development in raising living standards and reducing poverty.

5.2 Conflict of interests

It can be confirmed with confidence that there is no conflict of interests in this research.

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