

Review of successful land reform beneficiary projects resulting from co-ordinated service delivery within the South African sugar industry

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Abstract. The South African sugar industry has long recognised the need to promote diverse ownership of agricultural land under sugarcane with support instruments in place for the changing ownership profile. Industry initiatives have contributed significantly to the transfer of 21% of freehold land under sugarcane from previously white ownership to black growers. Extension continues to play a critical role in the South African sugar industry for the various groups of new land reform beneficiaries. However the sugar industry continues to be faced with declining yields on a number of farms of land reform beneficiaries. The lack of agricultural expertise and/or financial management coupled with unrealistic expectations, linked to limited re-investment into farms and poor coordination of stakeholders has proven challenging for the land reform beneficiaries. This paper outlines the processes that have been followed in the South Coast cane-growing region of South Africa in offering Project Operational Committee support and extension services to these new growers and highlights some productivity success stories that have been achieved.

Keywords: agricultural land, sugarcane, land reform beneficiaries, extension, service delivery

Introduction

The land reform process in the South African sugar industry began after the advent of democracy in the country in 1994. Various land acquisition programs were instituted by government to address inequalities in land ownership. These interventions, together with a willing-buyer/willing-seller principle have contributed to the transfer of 21% of land in the sugar industry from white ownership to new black emerging sugarcane growers. This group of growers became known generically as land reform beneficiaries. The nature and title of land ownership amongst this new grouping is either with individual ownership, where the farm is owned and managed by the individual grower or where dispossessed communities have been re-instated the newly transferred land which is managed under Community Property Associations (CPAs). Providing extension support to land reform beneficiaries has necessitated the adoption of a new approach compared with that of the past where extension was essentially delivered to individual land owners and large miller-cum-planter estates (farms owned by milling companies). Government regards newly transferred farms as individual projects which have been supported by various national and provincial programs to ensure that the farms maintain previous production levels. These support interventions have taken the form of capital injections to enable the purchase of capital items as well as certain production inputs such as fertilisers and seedcane.

In developing an approach to ensure effective and sustainable sugarcane farming amongst this new group of growers it became apparent that conventional methods of extension would not necessarily always work in this context (DM McElligott 2017, pers. comm., 10 January). Whilst it is possible to continue with conventional extension through one-on-one contact and study group membership where farms are managed by individuals, where the new ownership is with communities (CPAs) these methods become impractical. Therefore, a new approach was required to supplement the long-standing and familiar approaches to extension.

The paper outlines the process that some land reform beneficiaries adopted on the path to becoming successful sugarcane farmers. Many farms have transferred to either individuals or communities of black growers in the South African Sugar Industry with or without any agriculture knowledge. These farms were allocated in different programs i.e. Pro-active Land Acquisition Strategy (PLAS) and restitution or redistribution acquisitions through the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform (DRDLR). Through a passion for farming and willingness to implement advice provided by various stakeholders including Project Operational Committees, some land reform farmers have become successful.

Methods

It became apparent that effective and continuous extension support for land reform beneficiaries was necessary to maintain and improve long term production and sustainability. Due to inexperience in sugarcane farming and financial management, production on certain farms declined following transfer of ownership. Unrealistic expectations amongst some grower members were evident. Farms previously owned by individual families were now owned by a

number of families expecting the same returns. This was not possible due to the same revenue as before now being distributed amongst more families. These expectations needed to be managed through explanations of the economic reality of each individual project.

To address the wide-ranging issues facing this sector of growers it was thought appropriate to establish Project Operational Committees. These Committees were comprised of all relevant sugar industry stakeholders together with government representatives. In practice these Committees operated by meeting with representatives of individual projects as opposed to groups of projects. Although time consuming, this approach was necessary to carefully and effectively address the many and diverse issues facing these growers. The meetings themselves were held monthly and formally structured with agreed agendas and minutes. Meetings were mostly chaired by the South African Sugar Research Institute (SASRI) extension specialist, although the long-term goal is to empower the community members of the projects to run the meetings themselves.

This extension approach has been used successfully with land reform beneficiaries on the South Coast. In 2010 there were approximately 12 farms where Project Operational Committee meetings had been established. A concern around the implementation and continuation of such Committees is that conflicts amongst project members may develop and this could negatively impact on the extension approach. It has been recognised that poor stakeholder coordination, failure to acknowledge that planning is a process and poor social facilitation can result in project collapse (B Chonco 2017, pers. comm., 3 February).

In attempting to address the complex challenges to extension that prevail amongst the land reform beneficiaries, the Project Operational Committee approach is aligned to extension theory with negotiations of interest and construction of some type of working platform. The Committees involve different actors, such as researchers, subject-matter specialists, rural leaders, representatives of farmer associations and groups, where 'negotiation' emerges as a key word in current views (Cristóvão, Koehnen & Portela 1998).

In the functioning of the Project Operational Committees a needs assessment of the target group was one of the first steps in the planning and development of extension programs for the various projects (MacClaslin & Tibezinda 1998). This methodology provided the platform for discussing agronomic, economic and social issues, generating possible solutions and recommendations. The Project Operational Committee methodology was implemented on each farm in the South Coast area, as follows:

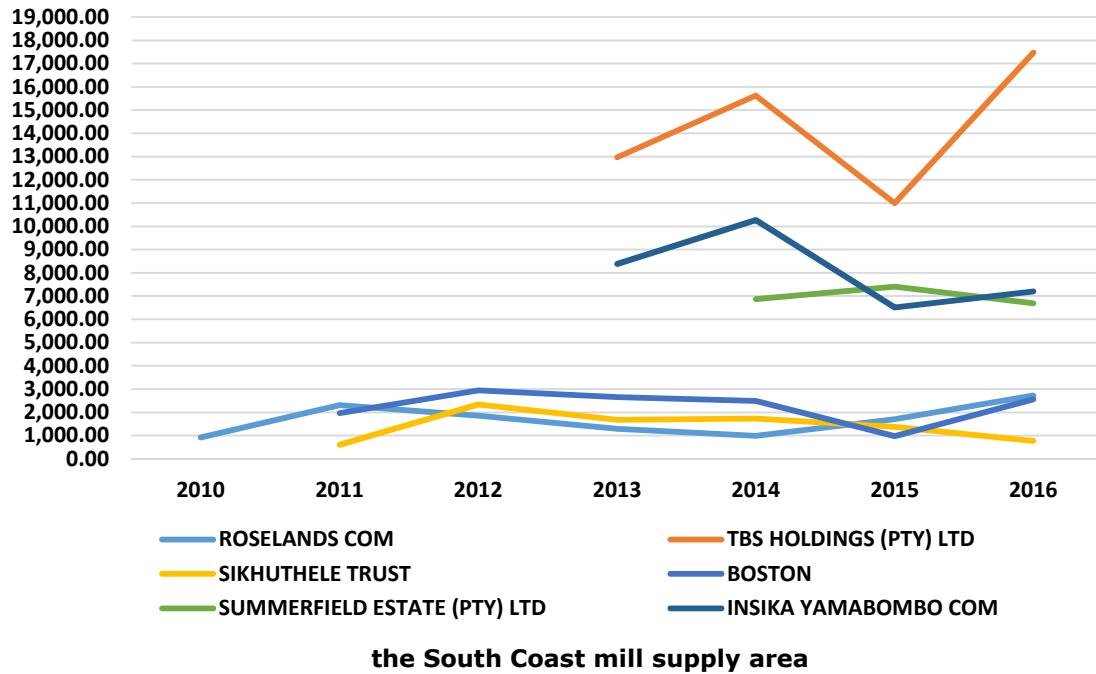
- Step 1: Project Operational Committee established and membership agreed and confirmed.
- Step 2: Consultation between Department of Rural Development and Land Reform (DRDLR), and Community Trust directors was held to describe the project and stakeholders.
- Step 3: Within the farm a new expansion/new development area was identified, which included a soil assessment and production potential estimate. If potential new development areas were identified, permission to change land use was applied for from the Department of Agriculture and Environmental Affairs (DAEA).
- Step 4: Necessary training needs were identified and facilitated.
- Step 5: If necessary, finance and other inputs for the project were sourced from a relevant stakeholder body. This included finance from the DRDLR for land preparation, seedcane, fertiliser and herbicides.
- Step 6: The SASRI Extension Specialist arranged Project Operational Committee meetings, including field days.

Results

The production data for farms with and without Project Operational Committees was compared for the period from 2010 to 2016. Figure 1 shows production trends for farms where Project Operational Committees were operative during the study period. On these farms production levels were either maintained or improved, ensuring the sustainability of the farms concerned. Project Operational Committees created a general awareness of the realities of farming and enabled participants to respond positively and willingly to advice and recommendations delivered through this process. The meetings have also enabled the various support-role players who participate to gain a better understanding of the challenges facing the growers and thereby enable more effective and timely response to these needs (Ferguson 2013). Advice and recommendations are also packaged in an appropriate manner for each individual need and not simply in a generic fashion. Through this process advice can be more effectively targeted at the intended recipients. Having the support-role players present at the meeting has enabled more effective implementation of remedial actions. In the event of differing views the Project

Operational Committee is an effective forum to discuss and agree on an acceptable solution to address the particular challenge.

Figure 1. Cane yield (tons) production history 2010-2016 for land reform growers in



the South Coast mill supply area

By comparison, in an area where Project Operational Committees did not function and where training has been sporadic, the trend has been a slow but consistent drop in production over the past seven years (Figure 2). This reduction in production cannot be attributed to inferior natural resources since the farms are in the same area enjoying similar rainfall and with similar soils.

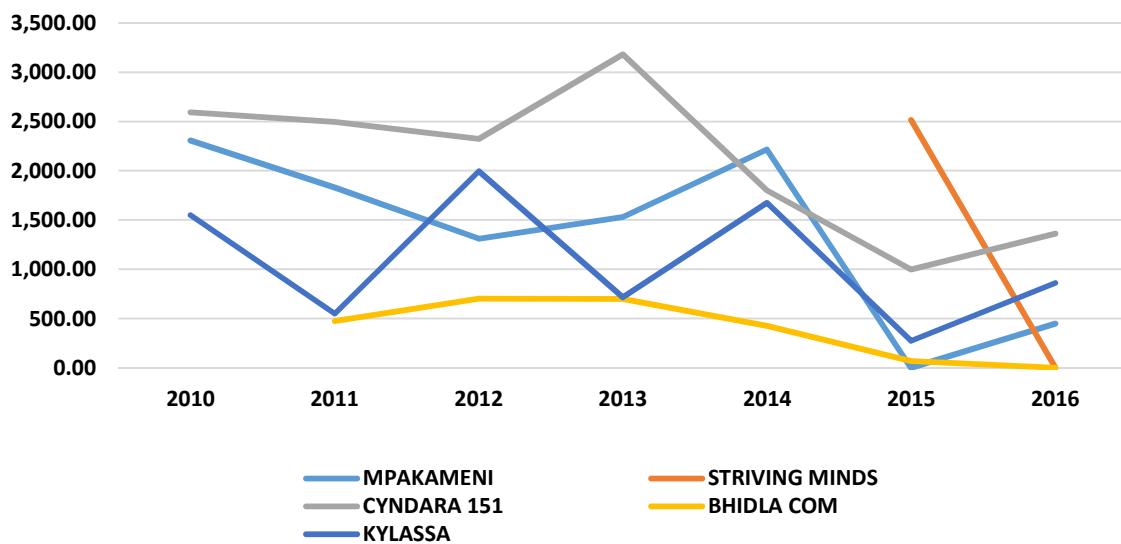
Where Committees were not active due to a number of reasons, there was no effective point of contact with these projects. This lack of contact has led to these projects being left behind in many aspects of farming such as new varieties, pest and disease control, crop nutrition and other new technologies and methods. It also proved difficult to facilitate any form of training without a proper means of identifying training and development needs. This led to these projects being even further behind in their development.

Conclusion

Project Operational Committees have shown to be effective in stimulating the adoption of research results, modern agronomic technologies, the conversion of technical messages to practical implementation, and the ability for land reform beneficiaries to develop into sustainable commercial farmers. The key to this success is enabling land reform beneficiaries to identify and appreciate the natural resources of their farms and to match the resource base to a suitable enterprise, particularly where opportunities and markets are already in place.

The establishment and implementing of operational committee methodology has motivated the South Coast land reform beneficiaries to adopt better farming practices, establish on-farm seedcane nurseries and to have the potential to significantly increase sugarcane supply to the mill. The Operational Committees have increased awareness of new varieties and have served as a technical training facility. Relationships between local growers, technicians and the milling company as well as the link to scientific research results have been strengthened. Project Operational Committees act as a catalyst for sustainable and improved livelihoods through the creation of employment. The methodology has shown that extension has a critical role to play in the development of sustainable, competent and economically successful growers. This process will lead to the successful implementation and continuation of land reform beneficiary projects, if it is adopted with commitment by both extension providers and growers alike. The methodology can be applied to other commodities.

Figure 2. Cane yield production (tons) on farms where Project Operational Committees were not active on the South Coast area 2010-2016



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