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Challenges Faced by Strategic Partners in Driving Extension Programme: Lessons Learnt From Madzivhandila Agricultural College of Limpopo Province, South Africa

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ABSTRACT The section on strategic partners and extension and partnerships at Madzivhandila College of Agriculture aims to identify key areas that require college intervention and to offer appropriate joint intervention strategies by strategic partners and extension and partnerships in the college. The purpose of the study is to clarify the roles of strategic partners and the extension and partnerships section at Madzivhandila College of agriculture. In this study, the authors have adopted a textual analysis to establish the roles of strategic partnerships. It is out of these roles that a broader recommendation, which could be followed by further research to determine their authenticity could be conducted. The authors discussed how stakeholder analysis was conducted, stakeholder selection, relevant partners, terms of references, and challenges faced by strategic partnerships. The findings in this study revealed that there are more than five strategic partners Madzivhandila Agricultural College entered into with; Westfalia, South African Avocado Growers Association (SAAGA), UNIVEG KATOPE, Citrus Growers Association (CGA), Citrus Research International (CRI), Pioneer Hi-Bred RSA (Pty) Ltd, Department of Correctional Services, Perishable Products Export Control Board (PPECB). PANNAR seed, Makhado Specialised oil Extract enterprise, Ross Breeders Association, Hygro-tech, and SAGA. The study concludes by suggesting a workable solution as a recommendation between the strategic partners and the college.

INTRODUCTION

Strategic partnership is an agreed-upon collaboration between businesses with common missions. Although partnerships can take on a number of objectives and levels of formality depending upon the nature of the agreement, the overall goal of strategic partnerships is to share resources in a way that promotes growth for all partners (Vanags et al. 2018), whereas McKay (2014), argues that strategic partnerships are mutually beneficial relationships between Madzivhandila College of Agriculture and the twelve strategic partners in Limpopo province; often these partners enter into partnerships because they do not feel they have enough value on their own. Madzivhandila College cannot address all the needs of emerging farmers without partnering with skillful strategic partners. The mandate of the college, besides higher education, is to train and equip smallholder farmers near the college. The college itself does not have adequate facilities and also lacks knowledge in some specialized areas. Strategic partnerships help a lot in bridging the gaps and ensure that both smallholder farmers and commercial farmers benefit from the partnership initiatives.

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Terms of reference usually formalize the roles of each member of the partnership. However; informal arrangements can be as valuable. Madzivhandila College of Agriculture (MCA) initiated a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Citrus Growers Association (CGA), Citrus Research International (CRI), Pioneer Hi-Bred RSA (Pty) Ltd, and with the Department of Correctional Services. The informal partnerships have been entered into with local commercial farmers who have extensive knowledge in agriculture, for example, Vhembe Livestock farmers and Nwanedi tomato growers. In informal partnerships, there are no terms of references and memorandum of agreement.

The memorandum of understanding is signed by the parties to cement the agreement and to stipulate the roles that must be played by both parties in the partnership. MCA has entered into a strategic partnership with different stakeholders most of which are commercial farmers and input suppliers. The role of the college is to train farmers, students doing diploma programs, and students who are on the learnership program, while on the other hand, the role of strategic partners is to offer practical facilities and mentorship to these students. The study also highlighted how the stakeholder analysis is conducted (Malena 2004). Furthermore, Malena (2004), hinted that stakeholder analysis is also conducted in a more formal manner than informal (depending on the need or circumstance).

Potential advising service providers are thought to be agricultural education institutions. "In terms of joint efforts with NGO's and private providers, the role of universities and other agricultural education institutions in delivering extension services has been restricted" (Raidimi and Kabiti 2017). Although there are limitations, commodity-oriented extension or technical assistance is developing through private enterprises and some government-private joint ventures. Organizations tend to carefully consider substantive issues such as budgets or administrative arrangements over relationship issues such as the inability to resolve conflicts, according to Raidimi and Kabiti (2017). These challenges are the major cause of partnership failure, according to Raidimi and Kabiti (2017). Successful partnerships select someone to serve as a dedicated partnership manager, such is the case with Madzivhandila College of Agriculture.

"Stakeholder analysis is an approach, a tool or a set of tools for generating knowledge about actors – individuals and organizations to understand their behavior, intentions, interrelations and interests, and for assessing the influence and resources they bring to bear on decision-making or implementation process" (Varvasovszky and Brugha 2000). In the colleges, conducting stakeholder analysis has become a fairly standard practice in the preparation and design of development intervention (Malena 2004). Malena (2004) highlighted that stakeholder analysis may be carried out in a more or less formal manner (depending on the need or circumstances). It is nevertheless considered a crucial step towards (1) identifying the broad universe of stakeholders that may influence or be influenced by the partnership, and (ii) determining which stakeholders should be involved in the partnership.

According to Futaki (2010:21), "stakeholders are initially identified through reputation, focus groups, or demographic analysis". However, often most groups will be self-selecting or at least the choice will be readily apparent. Community groups frequently seek opportunities to put forward their views. In Madzivhandila College of Agriculture, stakeholders were selected based on their expertise and commodities they produce vis-à-vis farmers identified needs coupled with the commodities that are produced in the area such as mango, litchis, citrus, avocado, macadamia, garlic, pepper, sweet potato, and so on. Madzivhandila College of Agriculture cannot address all the needs of emerging farmers without partnering with skillful strategic partners. The mandate of the college, besides higher education, is to train and equip smallholder farmers near the college. The college itself does not have adequate facilities and lacks knowledge in some specialized areas. This study seeks to clarify the roles of strategic partners and extension and partnerships section in Madzivhandila College of agriculture, to identify the critical areas that need intervention by the college and to recommend appropriate approaches of joint intervention by strategic partners and extension and partnerships in the college.

The Problem

The problem investigated in this study is that there is a series of challenges concerning the way strategic partners are operating in Madzivhandila Agricultural College. Chief amongst which are budget constraints affecting the colleges of agriculture in Limpopo Province because they are still controlled at the Provincial Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, the strategic partners are also not able to give direct financial support to the college because once the money is deposited into the college account, it is difficult for it to be accessed because of the provincial departmental procurement system. The MoU's can only be signed by the Head of Department of the Department of Agriculture and Rural development and there are not so clear goals between the college and strategic partners.

Objectives

This study is guided by the following objectives:

- To clarify the roles of strategic partners and extension and partnerships section in Madzivhandila College of agriculture;

- To identify the terms of references for both parties;
- To recommend appropriate approaches of joint intervention by strategic partners and extension and partnerships in the college.

METHODOLOGY

Madzivhandila College of Agriculture has entered into a strategic partnership with different stakeholders after a need arose for addressing all the needs of the emerging farmers. The college itself does not have adequate facilities and also lacks in some specialized areas. Strategic partners help a lot in bridging the gap and ensure that both smallholder farmers and commercial farmers benefit from the partnership initiatives.

The authors have adopted a textual analysis to establish facts about strategic partnerships. This involves reviewing hard copies, electronic records, reports, programs, logs, performance ratings, funding proposals, meeting minutes, newsletters, and marketing materials (Bowen 2009: 27-40). Literature, reports, and meeting minutes were reviewed to generate enough evidence about the roles of strategic partners. Based on these developments, the facts generated would then be synthesized to make broad recommendations that could be followed by further research to narrow those broad recommendations.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

The results are presented by highlighting the key strategic partners, clarification of the roles of strategic partners and extension and partnerships section in Madzivhandila College of Agriculture, the terms of reference, and the challenges that strategic partners are facing in this alliance. The results will then determine the way forward and consequently the recommendations.

Strategic Partners in Madzivhandila College of Agriculture

"The strategic partnership is defined in South Africa law as a contract between a government institution and a private party, where the private party performs an institutional function and/or uses state property in terms of output specifications" (Raidimi and Kabiti 2017). "Partnerships are characterized by mutual trust and commitment, integrity, integration, co-operation, honesty, a willingness to openly declare problems and work together to find answers, the sharing of data and ideas, improvements and best practices, clearly understood responsibilities, collaborative R&D, and a desire to continuously improve products and services" (Vanags et al. 2018). This study highlights that Madzivhandila College of Agriculture was able to enter into strategic partnerships with different institutions that have a stake in agriculture for reasons as mentioned in Vanags et al. (2018). The first major partnership entered into was with Westfalia (Hans Merensky Group of Companies) where smallholder farmers were introduced to the production, marketing, and processing of avocado. Westfalia was the prominent world-acclaimed enterprise where Dr. Hans Merensky started farming and where Hans Merensky Foundation and Hans Merensky Trust were born. South African Avocado Growers Association (SAAGA) was another partner the college engaged itself with. SAAGA is involved with farmers through study groups, assisting farmers during their information days, etc. Katope Company was another partner who identified five emerging avocado growers and grooms them on export marketing. Perishable Products Export Control Board (PPECB) trained ten (10) farmers and was also involved in assisting in implementing global gap requirements (subtropical fruits). Nine technicians from the Vhembe district had undergone training on global gap requirements. Another partnership was entered with the Citrus Growers Association (CGA) and Citrus Research International (CRI) who were involved in citrus production. The other partner such as the Pannar (Pioneer Hi-Bred RSA (Pty) Ltd), Makhado Specialised Oil Extract enterprise, Ross Breeders Association, Hygro-tech, and South African Garlic Association (SAGA).

Terms of References

The college draft the Memorandum of Understanding and present it to the strategic partners who append their signatures; both parties into a working document sign the final draft after an agreement has been reached. All aspects of how a consultant or team will perform an evaluation are defined in the terms of reference document. It specifies the evaluation's objectives and scope, as well as the consultant's or team's tasks and a detailed description of the resources available to undertake the study (IEG 2011). For growth and evolution to happen in institutions, the terms of reference must be drawn. These terms of reference define the responsibilities of each partner in the partnership. However, some were not even more formalized but in operation towards common goals of assisting smallholder farmers. At MCA MoU's with CGA/CRI, Pioneers Hi-Bred RSA (Pty) Ltd, and the correctional services were initiated.

Legal Aspects

All partnerships operate based on a legal construct. This can be a legal entity, for instance, "an NGO or a partnership in the true sense of the term where the partners are each accountable following their legal basis" (OECD LEED 2006:22). In this study, a "Term of Reference" and "Memorandum of Understanding" stipulate that their statuses are held by several partnerships as inspired by the non-profit nature of the partners themselves.

Monitoring and Evaluation

In this study, the planning, monitoring, and evaluation of the activities are done by Madzivhandila College of agriculture and the strategic partners. Minutes and reports are then written and submitted to the Provincial Department of Agriculture and Rural Development because they are the custodian of the colleges of agriculture. Monitoring and evaluation, according to OECD LEED (2006: 25), can assist partners in anticipating changes that may affect the partnership so that they can collaboratively plan for the consequences of such change. This, for example, allows the partnership to:

- Adapt to changes in the competitive or regulatory environment;
- Expand, shrink, or modify the focus of a partner relationship as needed;
- Minimize the negative consequences of downsizing, mergers, or reorganization;
- React to reorganization and/or important employee departures.

Communication Strategy by Partners

"To make a partnership inclusive all voices within it must be heard. This requires and guarantees a balance of influence, mutual respect, and care in the organization" (OECD LEED 2006:16; Calabrese 2008). Communication between partners and the Madzivhandila College of Agriculture was between extension services at the college level and not between the Provincial Department of Agriculture and Rural Development; therefore, the role of the department was that of facilitating the signing of Memorandum of Understanding, Terms of Reference and budget allocation only. The study also indicated that continual two-way communication with local communities and farmers was carried out to ensure that the partnership becomes visible and recognized within its specified area of activity; a permanent outreach approach was adopted as a major component of a communication plan. The partnership manager at Madzivhandila College of Agriculture was hired to support healthy relationships by coordinating partner communication, ensuring adherence to norms and collaboration processes, spotting potential conflicts, mediating disputes, and tracking the working relationship's health over time. The college and strategic partners built a communication structure in this fashion (Table 1).

Challenges Faced by Strategic Partnerships

The colleges of agriculture in Limpopo province are still under full control of the Provincial

Table 1: Pattern of communication by strategic partners

Type of communication	*Means of communication*	*Advantages*	*Disadvantages*
Formal Communication	Emails, printed media	References are always there	Depends on the availability of gadgets and electricity
Informal Communication	Dialogues, chats, phone conversations	Face to face communication	No references, information cannot be traced

Source: World Bank and Calabrese 2008

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. Their budgetary plans are informed by the departmental strategic plans and budget. The relationship between the college and identified strategic partners is not at the level the college would have wanted them to be, the colleges would be enjoying support from partners had they been autonomous. The Head of the department on behalf of the college signs the memorandum of understanding and dictates the contents within the Memorandum of understanding, to which she was supposed to sign that document without dictating terms of references within it.

The above challenges are difficult to address because the colleges are still under the control of the Provincial Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. If colleges of agriculture are given the autonomous status, then it is envisaged that the college and strategic partners can work closely without obstacles.

The public sector is constrained by a wide range of role actors (farmers and extension people) as well as the extra obligation of dealing with new issues such as administration-related challenges, marketing, and agribusiness. Agricultural extension, in particular, is constrained by limited resource availability. The long-term goal is to incorporate numerous agricultural stakeholders in the development process, as well as to strengthen current Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs). Outside of the public sphere, there are immense financial resources as well as a vast universe of talent and expertise that may help farmers in important ways (Raidimi and Kabiti 2017). Stakeholder analysis and stakeholder selection were carefully done by MCA. A stakeholder analysis was done before selecting the different stakeholders. Stakeholders were then selected based on their expertise and commodities they produce vis-à-vis farmers identified needs coupled with the commodities that are produced in the area such as mango, litchis, citrus, avocado, macadamia, garlic, pepper, sweet potato, and so on. After these processes were finished, the MoU's were developed and signed by the Head of Department (HOD) of the Provincial Department of Agriculture and Rural Development on behalf of Madzivhandila College of Agriculture. The stakeholder analysis was done by the college more formally. To assess the stakeholders, the following criteria were used: (i) determining the broad universe of stakeholders who may influence or be influenced by the partnership, and (ii) determining which stakeholders should be involved in the partnership. When conducting stakeholder selection, Madzivhandila College of Agriculture identified stakeholders through their expertise. Ninety percent of the strategic partners that allied with Madzivhandila College of Agriculture were based in Limpopo province and they are the following: Westfalia (Hans Merensky Group of Companies), SAAGA, Katope company, PPECB (Western Cape), CGA and CRI, PANNAR seed, Makhado Specialised oil Extract enterprise, Ross Breeders Association, Hygro-tech and SAGA. The above strategic partners were selected based on their expertise and their willingness to work with small-scale farmers.

Strategic partners have a legal basis, they have signed a Term of Reference and Memorandum of Understanding with the Provincial Department of Agriculture and Rural Development on behalf of MCA. The communication pattern is based on two-way communication with communities and farmers. Communication between partners and the MCA was also between extension services at MCA and not between the department of agriculture and rural development; therefore, the role of the department was to facilitate the signing of Terms of Reference and Memorandum of Understanding and budget allocation only.

From the findings of this study, it is evident that the challenges affecting strategic partners are still not addressed. The only way in which the challenges facing strategic partners can be addressed is when the colleges are given autonomous status. The Provincial Department of Agriculture and Rural Development which are currently controlling the colleges must be relieved from this responsibility.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the mandate of the college, besides, higher education, is to train and equip the smallholder farmers as well as to foster teaching and learning strategies for students. The college itself does not have adequate facilities and also lacks in some specialized areas. Strategic partnerships help a lot in bridging the gaps and ensure that both smallholder farmers and commercial farmers benefit from the partnership initiatives. Stakeholder analysis and selection play a big role in the functioning of partnerships in colleges because not every stakeholder can be relevant in addressing a particular problem. Relevant stakeholders with some specialized knowledge are required in partnerships.

The strategic partners have their pattern of communication which is based on a two-way communication system that involves communities and farmers, extension officers, and strategic partners. Communication patterns are structures in which communication flows in an organization.

It can be concluded that the challenges that were not addressed in strategic partnerships with colleges need to be addressed urgently for extension work to be effective. The alliance with strategic partners should be enhanced and communication deepened. The provincial department of agriculture and rural development should pave way for the college principals to enter into partnerships with strategic partners and sign MoU's without involving them.

The key lessons learned from this study can be summarized as follows:

- The strategic partners help lesson the work of extension officers working at the colleges through specialized knowledge that they have in a particular field
- Farmers get information about a particular commodity and sign a contract with relevant markets
- Communication patterns between communities and farmers, extension officers, and strategic partners existed
- Farmers and extension officers receive specialized training in a particular field
- There is a legal aspect involved between the strategic partners and MCA in the form of ToR and MoU's.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The authors of this study, therefore, recommend that the head of the department of agriculture and rural development should give total authority to the college principal and extension services to sign the terms of references and memorandum of understanding and full responsibility for the budget meant for farmer development. Furthermore, the authors recommend that monitoring and evaluation must be done because it helps partners anticipate changes that may affect the partnership so they can collaboratively plan for the implementation of changes. For instance, this helps the partnership to:

- Adapt to competitive or regulatory environment changes
- Expand, reduce, or shift the focus of a partner relationship, as needed
- Reduce the negative effects of downsizing, mergers, or restructuring
- Respond to reorganization and/or departures of key personnel

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