

BOOK REVIEW

DOI: 10.5836/ijam/2014-02-08

Farm management extension guides

David Kahan

Six books, published 2013 by Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Rome. Published as pdf e-books, free of charge.

1. Market-oriented farming: an overview. E-ISBN 978-92-5-107540-1. 90pp. <http://www.fao.org/docrep/018/i3227e/i3227e.pdf>
2. Economics for farm management extension. E-ISBN 978-92-5-107542-5. 90pp. <http://www.fao.org/docrep/018/i3228e/i3228e.pdf>
3. Managing risk in farming. 107pp. E-ISBN 978-92-5-107544-9 <http://www.fao.org/docrep/018/i3229e/i3229e.pdf> (First printed 2008)
4. Farm business analysis using benchmarking. 142pp. E-ISBN 978-92-5-107546-3 <http://www.fao.org/docrep/018/i3230e/i3230e.pdf>
5. Entrepreneurship in farming. 127pp. E-ISBN 978-92-5-107548-7. <http://www.fao.org/docrep/018/i3231e/i3231e.pdf>
6. The role of the farm management specialist in extension. 127pp. E-ISBN 978-92-5-107552-4. <http://www.fao.org/docrep/018/i3232e/i3232e.pdf>

Perhaps the only subject around which some consensus has been built within the development community about the appropriate path to develop smallholder farming is market access, which invariably implies commercializing peasant agriculture and producing beyond mere subsistence needs. The argument is constantly turning to the logic of generating a surplus which can be sold for profit as the sure way to alleviate poverty. After all, if cash income is the one universally agreed measure of well-being, the opportunity to earn it must be a central goal of policy to improve livelihoods. The academic literature has also given a significant amount of attention to the notion of market participation of small farmers. But market participation presupposes that output expands sufficiently for the farmer to sell the surplus while meeting the household's needs. This seems a tall order where output has been on the decline for a long time and prospects of small farmers making a smooth transition from their existing 'keyhole gardening' to market-oriented farming, have been remote.

Expanding output and productivity of small farms must therefore become a priority. But the specific ways and means to achieve these have hardly been explored beyond the generalist prescriptions for government to formulate policies to support small farmers. The theoretical foundations of such prescriptions have not always been rigorously examined and explicated, nor has adequate attention been given to the imperative for more practical interventions at the level of production and utilization of produce, procurement and use of inputs, pricing of inputs and outputs, and the arrangements that mediate and facilitate these processes. This

yawning gap seems to be what the 6-volume series published by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) set out to achieve.

The six volumes have been appropriately entitled:

1. Market-oriented farming: an overview
2. Economics for farm management extension
3. Managing risk in farming
4. Farm business analysis using benchmarking
5. Entrepreneurship in farming
6. The role of the farm management specialist in extension

The single author of these volumes, David Kahan, justifies the production of these documents on the grounds that they focus on the capacitation of the small farmers. The current era that features rapid population growth, urbanization, and market liberalization has altered the competitive terrain in which small farmers find themselves and call for urgent action to focus on empowerment to strengthen production capabilities through building up management skills and competencies necessary to confront the emerging challenges. It is recognized that the challenge goes beyond confronting challenges to making farming pay its way through enlarged profitability. The agricultural extension system was seen as the source of this empowerment and its own capacitation in that direction is crucial. The crucial challenge is responding in the most appropriate manner to the new needs that are associated with market-oriented agriculture. In order to effectively support and empower small farmers and transfer skills and capabilities to them, the extension service itself needs to be strengthened. This is what the series set out to achieve.

Taking the books in turn, the first one, *Market-oriented farming: an overview*, focuses on the changes in the character of developing country agriculture over the past decades. The global changes that now define the global development themes around which dialogues rage, have changed the scene in ways that are unmistakable and impactful. The book presents the current context in very simple and easily accessible language. In the first of the three chapters of the book, changes affecting farming are enunciated by drawing attention to the afore-mentioned global themes that included climate change, the information technology revolution that conspired with the trends towards greater market liberalization and globalization. The recent financial crises that came to a head in 2008 only exacerbated a problem that was already taking its toll in the unrelenting impoverishment and destitution of small farmers, and that was constituting a policy-making nightmare. Robust theoretical anchors for the mindset that commercialized agriculture held the key were presented in language that belies their immense sophistication and rigour.

The second book, *Economics for farm management extension*, dwells on the key concepts and principles of economics that both farmers and the farm support organizations, including the extension services, direly

need. The whole question of farming as a business takes a different view of farmers and farming and incorporates pricing, for both inputs and outputs, and financial management that requires knowledge of basic economics. The functioning of a modern market economy needs to be clearly understood by everyone that operates in it and those basic economic concepts and principles were crucial to understanding such an economy.

The third book, *Managing Risk in Farming*, deals with the question of risks in agriculture which no doubt constitute the most potent and formidable obstacle to investment in the first instance. If farmers are reluctant to invest due to their perception of risks with which they could not cope, then the prospects for profitability were very remote. The book provides the extension services with tools to identify and recognize the nature of risks and how to deal with them. The essential management practices needed to confront these issues and deal with them decisively are highlighted in this volume.

The fourth book, *Farm business analysis using benchmarking*, addresses the aspects that prepared the farmer to see and operate farming as a business, rather than as a juxtaposition of cultural and economic and subsistence undertaking whose central goal was to attend to households' survival. Market-orientation embodied in the view of farming as a business implied expanded output that is essential to food security. How farmers can monitor their farming operations in terms of costs and returns is explained in the book. Benchmarking as a tool for planning the farm investment programme is illustrated and the steps in comparing entities with successful schemes in related geographical and socio-economic contexts are enunciated.

The fifth book, *Entrepreneurship in farming*, is one that explores the crucial role of entrepreneurial spirit and entrepreneurship in mediating farm activities and

the emergence of farming as a business. Understanding this concept and how it influences the generation of farm surpluses and stimulates economic activity is the focus of the book which also explores its theoretical foundations and applications in the real life. Importantly, the book takes the reader through the steps for developing entrepreneurship and how the extension service can contribute in that process.

The sixth book, *The role of the farm management specialist in extension*, addresses what is easily the most crucial topic from the point of view of developing the capacity to transform the agricultural system. The extension system should be in a position to impart the required management skills and competencies to the clientele it serves. This required that it acquires these skills itself and possesses the necessary systems and procedures to transfer these skills in a way that is empowering and fits the adult learning context involved in training of farmers. This final book turns attention to awareness creation about what farm management skills are mandatory and the organizational requirements to deliver these.

The series publisher makes the very modest claim that it was written with the extension services in mind. However, the series contains quite robust and elegant intellectual messages, transmitted with simple sophistication that makes them accessible and appealing to all and sundry. Fundamental courses in agricultural marketing and development will benefit from the definitions and explanations the book provides of complex terms that are rendered in language that makes them clearer. Academic minded persons and policy makers will definitely find something for them in these series.

Professor Ajuruchukwu Obi
University of Fort Hare, Alice