Distance Learning Programme in Grain Management for the Southern African Development Community

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Abstract
The Southern African Development Community - Regional Food Security Training Programme (SADC-RFSTP) in collaboration with In- Service Training Trust (ISTT) developed and piloted a distance learning programme in grain management targeting small to medium scale grain traders. The overall objective was to address food security issues through access to knowledge by distance learning.

ISTT organised two planning workshops which were attended by twelve participants from training institutions in Lesotho, Mozambique, Tanzania and Zambia.

Subsequent to the planning workshops, the participants conducted a pilot programme in their respective countries. The programme was print based.

ISTT provided guidance and monitored the programme through review of progress reports, e-mailing and field visits. Lack of convenient and frequent access to telecommunication service was a major challenge faced by the collaborating training institutions.

ISTT in collaboration with the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) conducted another distance learning programme aimed at strengthening the capacity of front-line agricultural extension workers in Namibia, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia. Training workshops and online support facilitated the participants to develop print-based distance-learning materials, deliver, pre-test with prospective learners, revise, and pilot them in their countries.

The way forward is to replicate these programmes that are in demand across the SADC region.

BACKGROUND

One of the eight key goals on the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) Agenda is the achievement of development, economic growth, alleviation of poverty, enhancement of the standard and quality of life of the peoples of the region, and support to the socially disadvantaged groups through regional integration. Within this agenda, the pursuit of food security features as one of the specific areas of priority, and capacity building remains a key tool for reaching this end.

In the SADC region, attention to food security and nutrition became more prominent after the unprecedented impacts of drought during 1992-1995 and those of cyclones and flooding in 2000 and 2002. In response to these phenomena, SADC Member States among other things resolved to intensify regional cooperation in the area of food security.

One of the strategies developed was the boosting of trade in food and non-food agricultural commodities and enhancing advocacy for fair trade practices in agriculture. Additionally, in 1995 SADC launched a regional Food Security Training Project whose purpose was to improve food security in the region by strengthening the capacity of organisations in the public, private and voluntary sector through a programme of in-service, short-course training.

The agricultural marketing systems in nearly all SADC member states have gone through a process of dramatic change since the early 1990s and in a number of
countries these changes are continuing. Fifteen years ago, the marketing of staple food commodities, particularly coarse grains was tightly controlled. Governments restricted private sector participation in marketing of agricultural inputs and produce through a mechanism of legal restrictions as well as funding the operations of quasi government marketing agencies. The role of marketing agencies was to provide a steady supply of staple food commodities to urban areas at lower prices.

Over a number of years, the operation of this system gradually broke down due to a large number of different pressures. The marketing agencies were required to simultaneously fulfil both economic and social roles with the result that it was often not clear how their activities were to be appraised. The need to maintain supplies of cheap food to the cities was in direct conflict with other policy aims such as achieving self-sufficiency in staple grains.

Arising from these pressures and general dissatisfaction with the operation of the system, the agricultural marketing system was one of the first components of structural adjustment programmes (SAP) in the SADC member states. Legal restrictions on private sector participation in the trade of staple food commodities were abolished; subsidies and other price distortions were eliminated. Governments came to place greater faith in the operation of competitive markets to set prices and provide appropriate price signals to both producers and consumers.

Overtime, it become clear that achieving a competitive and efficient marketing system, which provided an adequate outlet to farmers for their produce, but also reacted to the changing needs of consumers was not simply a matter of removing legal restrictions on the participation of private sector traders. Decades of control and emphasis on large scale centralized organization of processing and storage meant that few people had any experience in grain management. Few people had any direct experience of setting up and running small businesses.

Competition between large numbers of individual enterprises was seen as the most effective way of reducing marketing costs and improving efficiency in operations such as storage, transportation, processing and retailing. If large numbers of traders were to enter the market, then it was important that support was provided to assist them gain skills and expertise in grain management.

An emphasis on distance learning, the presentation of learning materials through the medium of correspondence courses supported by short practical workshops was thought to be most appropriate for people running small businesses. In many cases, proprietors were the only source of labour and even where the business employs others, the presence of the owner was vital for control and management. It was not feasible to take entrepreneurs away from their business for long periods of time in excess of a few days. Therefore distance learning provided the opportunity for grain traders to learn at their own pace and apply the newly acquired knowledge and skills immediately.

In pursuance of the aim to upgrade the skills and expertise of the people working in the field of food security throughout the region, SADC-RFSTP in collaboration with some RTIs developed a distance learning programme in grain management.

**TRAINING WORKSHOPS**

Between 1999 and 2001, SADC-RFSTP supported three training workshops which were attended by 12 participants including three women from Lesotho, Mozambique, Tanzania and Zambia.

The objectives of the workshops were to provide participants with the knowledge and skills in organising and managing a distance learning programme, improve the training modules and exchange experiences from the pilot programme.

The ISTT located in Lusaka, Zambia, organised the workshops in collaboration with the Natural Resources Institute (NRI) of United Kingdom and SADC RFSTP. The workshops
used distance learning materials developed by the East and Southern African Management Institute (ESAMI), Grain Marketing Board of Zimbabwe (GMB) Department of Distance Education under University of Zimbabwe. The draft learning materials comprised the following modules:

**Business Management Modules**

**Phase One**
- Accounting
- Budgeting
- Preparing a business plan
- Sourcing of funds
- Capital investment
- Costing and pricing

**Phase Two**
- Cash management
- Stock control
- Credit control
- Stores records
- Purchasing management

**Phase Three**
- Buying, storing and selling grain
- Market research
- Market penetration
- Product promotion
- Managing staff
- Negotiating skills

**Grain Handling Modules**

- Quality determination
- Sampling
- Drying, cleaning and shelling
- Storage structures
- Stacking
- Grain handling equipment

- Insect pests of stored grain
- Options for insect pest management
- Insect control using pesticides
- Insect pest control using phosphine
- Rodent pests and their control
- Moulds and pesticides residues
- Milling
- Specialised processing – cereals
- Specialised processing- sunflower
- Packaging
- Transportation
- Documentation

The ISTT made the necessary logistical arrangements for the travel of participants and used its facilities for accommodation, meals and workshop execution.

The workshop resource persons were drawn from Natural Resources Institute, Ministry of Agriculture, University of Zambia, private sector, in addition to ISTT.

During the first workshop participants were introduced to concepts and practice of open and distance learning (ODL). They further improved the content, structure, text, and language of the learning materials, so that they could become more user-friendly.

The participants conducted practical work on pest management of grain at the post harvest technology unit at Mt Makulu Research Station, on the outskirts of Lusaka.

To familiarise the participants with operations of a distance learning unit, they visited the Directorate of Distance Education at the University of Zambia.

The participants undertook field visits to meet grain traders at Chongwe rural depots on the outskirts of Lusaka. They discussed issues such as purchasing of grain from farmers, storage, pest management, documentation and transportation of grain. The workers at the rural depots confirmed that they had not received any training in grain handling and business management and as such they would benefit from such training.

The participants further visited small and medium sized plants for processing of grain into maize meal and stock feeds. They discussed the challenges of running a middle sized processing plant and the benefits of value addition to grain.

At the end of field visits, participants were of the view that distance learning materials would provide useful information to grain traders.
EVALUATIONS
The workshop evaluation consisted of a formative and a summative evaluation.

The formative evaluation, which was through continued session evaluation, assisted to monitor and direct the workshop. At the end of each session, participants evaluated knowledge acquired, usefulness, presentation, training materials, and time.

The participants were of the view that what was covered in the sessions was satisfactory. They noted that the content and language of the modules needed be more user-friendly.

The summative evaluation in form of a final questionnaire covered all training and logistical aspects of the workshop. This evaluation indicated that participants were satisfied with the way in which the workshop had been organised. The evaluation form also allowed for additional comments.

Towards the end of the first workshop, participants discussed and developed a workplan for implementing the pilot. A follow-up workshop was proposed to discuss experiences, refine materials and specify further steps. SADC-RFSTP committed itself to funding the pilot.

IMPLEMENTING PHASE ONE MODULES
After the first workshop, the regional collaborators piloted twelve grain management modules in their respective countries. The objective of the pilot was to evaluate the appropriateness of the distance learning programme in meeting the needs of the target audience; small and medium scale grain traders. The pilot covered aspects such as the appropriateness of the distance learning materials; interest among the target group to undergo distance training, willingness by learners to contribute to the training programme and logistical support.

The regional collaborators that attended the TOT workshop managed the programme in their respective countries while the ISTT played a supervisory role.

The collaborating institutions advertised the programme widely in their countries. Mozambique did not participate in the pilot as this stage because they had to translate the materials from English into Portuguese.

Based on criteria set during the TOT workshop, RTIs recruited 15-20 learners each. Learners were mostly drawn from small and medium scale grain traders but in some countries it included individuals that could influence grain trade such as agricultural extension officers from private sector, governmental and nongovernmental organisations. Under this phase of the pilot, 76 learners with a gender distribution of 48 males and 28 females were recruited.

After enrolment learners started receiving the learning materials. To maintain uniformity, ISTT multiplied the learning materials.

The ISTT and SADC-RFSTP monitored the pilot training programme using e-mail, telephone and field visits.

Communication by e-mail between ISTT and RTIs was difficulty due to none availability of the service, poor connectivity and unfamiliarity of regional collaborators with e-mailing.

After completing course work, learners sat a final examination which was set by RTIs and moderated by ISTT. Of the 76 learners recruited 16 dropped out of the programme. Fifty seven of the 60 learners that sat the final examination passed. The learners dropped out due to loss of interest and pressure of work during the grain marketing period.
FOLLOW-UP WORKSHOP 2002

After completion of Phase One, the ISTT and SADC-RFSTP organised a follow up workshop, in Lusaka, to share experiences and develop a road map for the remaining modules. At the time of the follow-up workshop the programme in Lesotho had not been completed due to delays experienced in starting the programme. There was only one tutor to manage the programme as the other two trained tutors had left the institution at the time of implementing the programme.

At the beginning of the workshop, participants reported that owing to inadequate experience in running ODL programmes, they did not provide adequate information in the learners guide regarding submission of assignments, examinations and field practicals.

A summary of the lessons from the piloting phase one was as follows:

- The language and content of learning materials needed scaling down as it was too advanced for the target group;
- Apart from Lesotho, it was difficulty for ISTT to communicate with RTIs by telephone or e-mail due to non availability of the service and poor connectivity;
- Gender distribution was skewed towards men as married women at times needed to consult their husbands prior to enrolling. In addition, since this was the first time training programme of this nature was being offered women were very cautious about enrolling;
- The postal service could support a distance learning programme using print based materials. Mail took about 7 days to reach the furthest learners;
- There was a need to translate the learning materials into Kiswahili to facilitate access by more traders in Tanzania that could not read English; and
- Learners contributed towards their training by paying US$ 50 and meeting the cost of travel to attend practical work and final examination.

Arising from the lessons learnt from the pilot, SADC-RFSTP committed itself to provide additional funds for piloting the remaining modules.

Towards the end of the workshop developed a workplan for improving the remaining modules.

After the follow-up workshop, the regional collaborators submitted to ISTT comments on content, structure, text, and language aspects of the phase two and three modules. The final editing of the materials was done by resource persons working with ISTT.

To facilitate the continued involvement of collaborators, ISTT and SADC-RFSTP requested the commitment of the collaborating home institutions for logistical support, including time.

After the learning materials had been finalised by resource persons the ISTT in collaboration with SADC-RFSTP organised the second TOT workshop.

SECOND TOT WORKSHOP

From 27 November to 15 December 2000 ISTT and partner institutions organised the second TOT workshop whose objective was to finalise the development of learning materials as well as plan for piloting the remaining modules.

The workshop was attended by 9 participants from Mozambique, Tanzania and Zambia. Two participants were women. Lesotho did not participate in this workshop because the programme was terminated in October 2000 due to delays in the completion phase one.

Workshop Methodology
During the workshop participants made comments on the content, structure, text, and language of the learning materials. Some of the comments were incorporated into the final version of the learning materials.

**IMPLEMENTING PHASE TWO AND THREE MODULES**

After the second TOT workshop, RTIs in Tanzania and Zambia piloted phase two and three modules. The pilot covered aspects such as the appropriateness of the distance learning materials; interest among the target group to undergo distance training education; willingness by learners to contribute to the training programme and logistical support.

The RTIs recruited forty six learners with a gender distribution of 35 males and 11 females under phase two. Most of the learners recruited had participated in phase one of the programme.

After completing the course work, learners sat a final examination. Of the 46 learners recruited 3 dropped out of the programme. Forty one of the 42 learners that sat the final examination passed.

Upon completion of phase two, forty five learners with a gender distribution of 33 males and 12 females were recruited and trained under phase three. Of the 45 learners recruited 2 dropped out of the programme. Forty of the 43 learners that sat the final examination passed.

**LESSONS LEARNT**

- The grain management training programme worked very well in countries where grain marketing had been deregulated and that small to medium scale grain traders were engaged in the marketing of grain.
- There was demand for training in grain management in the region. Learners paid up to US$ 200 towards their training.
- In order to facilitate recruitment of learners, sponsorship and distribution of training materials, should go into collaborative arrangement with NGOs, donors, private companies involved in grain marketing.
- Apart from Lesotho very few women in the other pilot countries benefited from the programme. Due to the low literacy levels of women involved in grain trading, they could not qualify for the course. Some female grain traders were very cautious about enrolling because they were not sure of the benefits that could be derived from such training;
- With regard to sustainability of the grain management training programme, RTIs needed to integrate grain management into the existing curriculum so that it can be budgeted with other activities. In addition, RTIs need to establish collaborative arrangements with NGOs, donors and other stakeholders engaged in grain marketing.
- The postal service in the region can support a distance learning programme. There were no cases of training materials getting lost in the post. Learning materials were received within a fortnight from the time of posting.
- Print based ODL materials are suitable for grain traders. The use of internet based ODL materials is difficult due to poor internet connectivity as the high cost of accessing the internet.
- Training materials which were translated into Portuguese and Kiswahili were suitable for traders that had low levels of education.
- The grain management training programme is relevant in most SADC member states as it provides the necessary knowledge and skills needed by small and medium scale traders.

**CONCLUSION**

Between 2001 and 2004, the ISTT in collaboration with the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) conducted another distance learning programme aimed at strengthening the capacity of front-line agricultural extension workers in Namibia, Tanzania, Uganda, and
Zambia. Training workshops and online support facilitated the participants to develop print-based distance-learning materials. A paper on this programme was prepared for PCF3.

Training of small and medium scale traders in grain management can play a significant role in the attainment of food security and to uplift people out of poverty through the creation of sustainable employment and livelihood opportunities.

REFERENCES


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