

Original Research Article

Opportunities for University-Community Engagement in Roma Valley, Lesotho

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Abstract

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The study explored the opportunities for university-community engagement in Roma Valley, Lesotho. The specific objectives were to: describe the outreach needs of Roma Valley community that could be addressed by the Faculty of Agriculture, assess the capacity of the Faculty of Agriculture to provide outreach services to Roma Valley and the willingness of Roma Valley community to engage with the Faculty of Agriculture. The study surveyed 30 experts from four departments of the Faculty of Agriculture and 46 household heads from five villages of Roma Valley. An interview schedule was used for collect data which were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) computer programme version 20.0. The findings revealed that respondents recognized the outreach role of the Faculty of Agriculture in providing training to Roma Community members on a wide range of topics and subject areas and that the Faculty of Agriculture has enormous capacity to provide outreach services. Community members require extension support on a wide range of issues and have great desire to engage with the Faculty of Agriculture in outreach activities. It is concluded that opportunities exist for university-community engagement in Roma Valley.

Keyword: Opportunities, University, Community, Engagement, Roma.

INTRODUCTION

The term 'extension education' was first introduced in 1873 by Cambridge University to describe a particular educational innovation. This was to take the educational advantages of the universities to the ordinary people, where they lived and worked. After that the movement was spread to other institutions in Britain, the United States and elsewhere. It is of interest to find that the first grants to the extension movement from public funds, in this case from English county councils, were for extension lectures in agricultural science (Maunder, 1972).

Keregero (2002) stated that universities are generally considered to play very important role in helping societies to develop themselves. Therefore, they ought to be sensitive to the needs, interests and problems of the communities. In this context, the quality of university is

determined, in large part, by its ability to adapt to changing circumstances. The expectation is that communities can be enabled, through the benefit of exposure to expertise available in the university, to reflect on their own situations, contribute to the solution of the problems and satisfaction of the needs at national level, and participate in a rapidly changing and competitive world. Experience from other institutions of higher learning has demonstrated that communities and, indeed, the institutions themselves, stand to benefit from involvement in outreach activities.

According to Mollel (2002), universities were created as institutions for teaching, doing research and serving communities through community outreach. They are mandated to do these functions because they have a higher level of skills concentration than any other

institutions in their respective countries. While African universities have fared well in teaching and research, they have paid lip service to community outreach, a function which is just as important as teaching and research.

The approach to community outreach is often dictated by the mission of the institute, thus many universities in developing countries had failed to provide community service for availing developmental assistance and support directly or indirectly to interested stakeholders. Keregero (2002) stated that the strength of the university as a nucleus for outreach lies, among other things, in its acknowledged capacity to create knowledge. Since it is difficult to justify the existence of the university that does nothing directly to the majority of the population, the mandate for outreach draws the institution closer to the interests of the society as a whole, rather than those of a certain class. However, outreach has remained just as a mandate for many universities, which have continued to stay aloof from communities.

The origins of the National University of Lesotho date back to April 8, 1945, when a Catholic University College was founded at Roma. The Faculty of Agriculture has existed for more than 20 years now. Throughout this period there have not been serious efforts for university-community service by the Faculty of Agriculture directed at agricultural development. As a result, no measurable changes can be seen within the farming community of Roma Valley. This situation underscores the need for the Faculty of Agriculture to engage with communities within the vicinity of the university. As a starting point, it becomes necessary to explore the opportunities available for university-community engagement in the vicinity as a basis for establishing a community engagement programme.

The university must have sufficient capacity to provide outreach services more especially to the communities within its vicinity. Nuangchalerm and Chansirisira (2012) stated that, as one source of knowledge, university should be able to employ knowledge, both theoretical and practical, and implement it into communities which surround university service areas. The conception about strengthening community is widely distributed around the world, because of the streaming of globalization. A community that will sustain and continue to develop needs more cooperative learning and lessons learned in various kinds of effective practices.

According to Cortes (1992), the role of facilitating the relationship and examining issues between the university and the community can truly be a challenge. On the one hand, there might be an institution with an entrenched establishment that is rather inflexible and requires updating as new groups become involved with the university. On the other, there might be community representatives who have their suspicions about the university or have never seen themselves as having a significant relationship with the university. The function of

community outreach is to balance these two realities by introducing new programming ideas and proposals that will open up the campus to new segments of the public through community participation. The goal is for both sides to be responsive about the redefinition of roles and involvement in university matters.

The university should not only disseminate information to the intended communities, but also to more than consulting bodies. Cortes (1992) stated that the university's resources are tremendous, and yet one source of information hardly utilized is the faculty. There are faculty members who are involved in the community via their research and personal involvement in community-based issues. Community outreach in this area should direct its efforts toward facilitating greater interaction between the faculty and the community. A "Faculty to the Community" programme is an opportunity to schedule a presentation for faculty members to visit a community-based organization and to share information about their research and how it relates to the work of the organization. There are faculty members who work on campus already and this exemplifies their concern for the community. Community outreach takes their commitment a step further into the community. Partnerships with the community have to be established by keeping in mind that outreach programming must meet the mission of the university balanced against the interests of the communities being served.

Universities should provide support to rural development. Traditionally universities, including agricultural universities, have focused most of their attention on national development through the two missions of research and teaching. Universities have often seen themselves as institutions to prepare graduates for national and international labour markets, and to address research problems. Academics have had to win national and international acclaim for the quality of their research and teaching, and this has sometimes been at the expense of making a greater contribution to local economies and communities. Only a small share of the university community appears to have developed strategies to contribute to the development of community education and to support local development (UNESCO, 2004).

Universities are developing strategies to intensify and widen their contribution to learning and development for rural people. In addition to their roles in curriculum development and training of teachers and trainers, universities play an essential role in conceptualizing development problems and policies. They can contribute in a variety of ways to supporting education in local communities and regions as well as supporting rural development initiatives. Universities can potentially make a greater contribution to the prospects of depressed, relatively neglected rural communities (UNESCO, 2004).

The university should work with the community to address community needs. Keregero (2002) stated that,

in order to ensure that the outreach process is based on a mutually acceptable programme, there is need to formulate community projects that demonstrate the growing partnership between the university and the community. From university's perspective, the choice of community projects would depend, on a large extent, on the ease with which they can be integrated into the teaching and research programme of academic faculties and departments. This is important in light of the principle of providing community service by means of application of existing expertise and the desire to rationalise the demands on the limited time of academic staff and students.

Maurice *et al.* (2005) stated that some communities are identified as disenfranchised from mainstream society and, therefore, in positions of greater relative need. That is, some community residents are economically disadvantaged with fewer resources available to them. Colleges and universities are more likely to reach out to communities that fit this profile in order to share their resources.

Universities should conduct outreach activities according to the will of the communities. Mark *et al.* (2003) stated that university outreach activities should be based in a healthy two-way communication between practitioners and professors. The practitioners could provide feedback to the professors concerning "best practices and success stories". This material could then be incorporated into classroom lectures. In return, the professors could advise practitioners in job-related problems, new concepts, and changing technologies as discovered through academic research activities. Textbooks regularly incorporate mini-testimonials from business leaders to assist in the connection between theory and practice. Faculty outreach activities can accomplish a far more advantageous and identifiable result through local interactions.

The purpose of the study was to explore the opportunities for university-community engagement in Roma Valley. The specific objectives were: To describe the outreach needs of Roma Valley community that could be addressed by the Faculty of Agriculture, to assess the capacity of the Faculty of Agriculture to provide outreach services to Roma Valley, to assess the willingness of Roma Valley community to engage with the Faculty of Agriculture.

METHODOLOGY

The study was quantitative descriptive and cross-sectional in design as data was collected at a single point in time. The target population was 30 experts from four departments of the Faculty of Agriculture, distributed as follows: Agricultural Economics and Extension (10), Animal Sciences (9), Crop Science (6) and Soil Science (5). The population also involved 654 heads of household

in five villages of Roma Valley, distributed as follows: Ha Mafefooane (129), Hata-butle (321), Khobeng (94), Pae-lea-itlhatsoa (75), and Tloutle Sekhutlong (35). Of this total, 7% was used as a sample size according to the proportion of each village, thus giving total population of 46 for all villages interviewed. Snowball sampling technique was used until the saturation level was achieved.

Instrumentation

The study used an interview schedule with open-ended and closed-ended questions and items. The instrument was constructed with the aid of literature and consultation with the supervisor. The validity of the instrument was checked by three experts in extension, including two from the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security. The reliability of the instrument was tested on 15 university staff members and the coefficient of reliability obtained by using Chronbach's Alpha formula was 0.79.

Data Collection

Data were collected by interview schedule administered by the researcher. Prior appointments with respondents were made to ensure their full participation.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed by the Statistical Packages for Social sciences (SPSS) version 20.0. The findings were presented in tabular form involving frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Outreach Needs of Roma Valley Community that could be addressed by the Faculty of Agriculture

The study investigated the outreach needs of Roma Valley community that could be addressed by the Faculty of Agriculture. The opinions of respondents regarding this aspect are summarized in Table 1 and they reveal that respondents agreed overwhelmingly that the following are outreach needs that could be addressed by the Faculty of Agriculture: community group formation (100%); Participatory decision-making (100%); how to conduct effective community meetings (100%); community need identification (100%); priority setting (100%) and community involvement in programme planning (100%). Other responses are: community involvement in programme evaluation. (100%); how to formulate community development projects (100%); soil

Table 1. Distribution of respondents by opinions regarding outreach needs

Outreach needs that could be addressed by the Faculty of Agriculture	Yes (%)	No (%)	*D/K(%)
Community leadership.	97.8	0.0	2.2
Community group formation.	100.0	0.0	0.0
Participatory decision-making	100.0	0.0	0.0
How to conduct effective community meetings.	100.0	0.0	0.0
Community needs identification.	100.0	0.0	0.0
Priority setting.	100.0	0.0	0.0
Community involvement in programme planning.	100.0	0.0	0.0
Community involvement in programme evaluation.	100.0	0.0	0.0
How to formulate community development projects.	100.0	0.0	0.0
Application of recommended crop husbandry practices.	91.3	8.7	0.0
Application of recommended livestock husbandry practices.	97.8	2.2	0.0
Range management practices.	95.7	4.3	0.0
Soil erosion control.	100.0	0.0	0.0
Improved nutrition for families.	95.7	4.3	0.0
Carrying out farming as a business.	100.0	0.0	0.0

Table 2. Distribution of respondents by opinions regarding need for extension support

Need for extension support	Yes (%)	No (%)	*D/K (%)
Regular visits by extension workers.	100.0	0.0	0.0
Exposure to method demonstration.	100.0	0.0	0.0
Exposure to result demonstration.	100.0	0.0	0.0
Involvement in the action learning cycle.	100.0	0.0	0.0
Access to up-to-date extension information.	100.0	0.0	0.0
Radio programme on agriculture.	100.0	0.0	0.0
Reading materials on agriculture.	86.7	6.7	6.7
Visit to the university farm to learn about improved farming.	100.0	0.0	0.0
Regular agriculture lessons provided by students of the faculty of agriculture	100.0	0.0	0.0
Regular agriculture lessons provided by staff of the faculty of agriculture.	100.0	0.0	0.0
Regular consultation to determine our needs.	90.0	3.3	6.7

erosion control (100%); carrying out farming as a business (100%); community leadership (98%); application of recommended livestock husbandry practices (98%); range management practices (96%); improved nutrition for families (96%) and application of recommended crop husbandry practices (91%).

In addition, the community members identified the following outreach needs that could also be addressed by the Faculty of Agriculture: marketing of produce; disease and pest management; weed management and herbicides application; irrigation scheduling; water conservation practices and Crop budget.

It is evident from these findings that respondents recognize the outreach role of the Faculty of Agriculture in providing training to Roma Community members on a wide range of topics and subject matter areas. According to Mollel (2002), university outreach as a form of scholarship that cuts across teaching, research and service involves generating, transmitting, applying and preserving knowledge for the direct benefit of external audiences in ways that are consistent with university or unit mission.

Respondents were further requested to indicate their opinions regarding need for extension support and their

opinions are summarized in Table 2. The findings reveal that respondents indicated that they needed extension support in the following forms: regular visits by extension workers (100%); exposure to method demonstration (100%); exposure to result demonstration (100%); involvement in the action learning cycle (100%); access to up-to-date extension information (100%) and radio programmes on agriculture (100%). Other responses were: visit to the university farm to learn about improved farming (100%); regular agriculture lessons provided by students of the faculty of agriculture (100%); regular agriculture lessons provided by staff of the faculty of agriculture (100%); regular consultation to determine our needs (98%) and reading materials on agriculture (87%).

According to the findings, respondents require extension support in various forms. Although farmers already have a lot of knowledge about their environment and their farming system, extension can bring them other knowledge and information which they do not have. The application of such knowledge often means that the farmer has to acquire new skills of various kinds: for example, technical skills to operate unfamiliar equipment, organizational skills to manage a group project, the skill to assess the economic aspects of technical advice

Table 3. Distribution of respondents by opinions in capacity of Faculty of Agriculture to provide outreach service to Roma Valley community

Capacity of Faculty of Agriculture to Provide Outreach Service to Roma Valley Community	n	Mean	SD
Competent staff in various disciplines of agriculture.	30	5.37	0.66
Overall willingness of the Faculty of Agriculture to engage with Roma Valley community members.	30	5.13	0.730
Proximity of the university farm that farmers can visit to learn about various aspects of agriculture.	30	5.13	0.860
Agricultural students who can conduct relevant research in Roma Valley community.	30	5.13	0.973
Staff who can conduct on-farm research with Roma Valley community members.	30	5.00	0.910
Access to university campus where short courses for farmers can be offered.	30	4.97	1.066
Agriculture students who can be used as outreach agents.	30	4.93	0.907
University policies that support Faculty-community engagement efforts.	30	4.90	1.094
Staff who have wealth of research knowledge that can be readily disseminated.	30	4.90	0.995
Ability of staff to prepare and produce relevant extension materials for community use.	30	4.87	0.973
Overall willingness of the National University of Lesotho to support outreach activities.	30	4.87	1.432
Connectivity by telephone can be used to reach out to farmers.	30	4.87	1.008
Proximity to the Faculty of Agriculture where open days targeting community members can be conducted.	30	4.83	1.392
Experienced staff in dealing with agriculture development issues.	30	4.80	0.961
Willingness of staff to engage in outreach activities.	30	4.70	0.915
Agriculture students who already reside in Roma Valley who can serve as agents of change.	30	4.57	1.455
Coverage of DOPE-FM radio that can be used to disseminate agricultural information to community members.	30	4.33	1.322
Access to the library where community members can access relevant information.	30	4.00	1.486
Internet connectivity that could promote the use of electronic extension techniques.	30	3.80	1.424
Modest funding to support community development efforts in Roma valley.	30	3.47	1.456
Overall		4.73	1.101

given, or farm management skills for keeping records and allocating the use of farm resources and equipment (FAO 2017). Investment into education of farmers is necessary, which should be developed on principles of ownership by the farmer community and training which would satisfy the needs and development of the training programme (Živković *et al.*, 2009).

Capacity of Faculty of Agriculture to Provide Outreach Service to Roma Valley Community

The study investigated the capacity of the Faculty of Agriculture to provide outreach service to Roma Valley community. The following scale was used to reflect opinions of respondents: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Slightly Disagree, 4 = Slightly Agree, 5 = Agree and 6 = Strongly Agree. For purposes of interpretation of the findings, means ranging from 3 and above were considered to reflect agreement while those below 3 were considered to reflect disagreement. Furthermore, standard deviations of less than 1.000 were taken to imply that respondents did not vary in their opinions, while those from 1.000 and above were taken to imply respondents have variation in opinions.

The findings in Table 3 indicate that the respondents considered the Faculty of Agriculture to generally have capacity to provide outreach services to Roma Valley community since the overall mean was 4.73. The standard deviations ranged from 0.669 to 1.486 and the overall was 1.107, which reflects variation of opinions

among respondents. Specifically, respondents agreed that the Faculty of Agriculture has capacity in terms of the availability of the following attributes: competent staff in various disciplines of agriculture (Mean = 5.37); overall willingness of the Faculty of Agriculture to engage with Roma Valley community members (Mean = 5.13); proximity of the university farm that farmers can visit to learn about various aspects of agriculture (Mean = 5.13); agricultural students who can conduct relevant research in Roma Valley community (Mean = 5.13) and staff who can conduct on-farm research with Roma Valley community members (Mean = 5.00). Other responses were: access to university campus where short courses for farmers can be offered (Mean = 4.97); agriculture students who can be used as outreach agents (Mean = 4.93); university policies that support Faculty-community engagement efforts (Mean = 4.90); staff who have wealth of research knowledge that can be readily disseminated (Mean = 4.90); ability of staff to prepare and produce relevant extension materials for community use (Mean = 4.87) and overall willingness of the National University of Lesotho to support outreach activities (Mean = 4.87). Respondents went further to indicate the following: connectivity by telephone can be used to reach out to farmers (Mean = 4.87); proximity to the Faculty of Agriculture where open days targeting community members can be conducted (Mean = 4.83); experienced staff in dealing with agriculture development issues (Mean = 4.80); willingness of staff to engage in outreach activities (Mean = 4.70); agricultural students who already reside in Roma Valley who can serve as agents of

Table 4. Distribution of respondents by willingness of Roma Valley to engage with the Faculty of Agriculture

Willingness of Roma Valley community to engage with the Faculty of Agriculture.	Yes (%)	No (%)	*D/K(%)
Desire of the community to work together with the Faculty of Agriculture for mutual benefit.	100.0	0.0	0.0
Desire of the community to contribute to education of students.	97.8	2.2	2.2
Desire of the community to interact and communicate freely with the Faculty of Agriculture.	97.8	0.0	2.2
Desire of the community to exchange their wisdom for access to new ideas and knowledge.	100.0	0.0	0.0
Desire of the community to acquire new knowledge and implement it practically in their own farming situations.	100.0	0.0	0.0

change (Mean = 4.57); coverage of DOPE-FM radio that can be used to disseminate agricultural information to community members (Mean = 4.30); access to the library where community members can access relevant information (Mean = 4.00); internet connectivity that could promote the use of electronic extension techniques (Mean = 3.80) and modest funding to support community development efforts in Roma valley (Mean = 3.47).

It is evident that respondents perceive the Faculty of Agriculture to have enormous capacity to provide outreach services to Roma Valley community. The strength of the University as a nucleus for outreach lies, among other things, in its acknowledged capacity to create knowledge. Since it is difficult to justify the existence of a university that does nothing directly to the majority of population, the mandate for the outreach draws the institution closer to the interests of society as a whole, rather than those of certain class (Keregero, 2002).

Other capacity attributes mentioned by the staff of Faculty of Agriculture are as follows: High caliber staff with wider experience and expertise in various disciplines of agriculture; availability of professors experienced and knowledgeable about community outreach who can guide un experienced staff members; laboratories and technical skills to provide soil test, disease and pest identification and animal disease identification; modest agricultural machinery capacity and basic implements; yoghurt processing; capacity to run on farm trials, for farmers in Roma Valley, by students doing their research studies.

All the mentioned attributes also entail massive capacity that the Faculty of Agriculture can use to provide necessary training and knowledge to community members for human resource development. Increasing complexity not only of technology but also of the life situation of farmers even in remote areas demands new skills. With the help of these skills, rural women and men acquire a better insight into the network of problems and recognize the alternative solutions available (FAO, 1998).

The findings reflect a great opportunity for the Faculty of Agriculture to provide much-needed service to the community. According to Harkavy (2005), a community-based learning centre can take a proactive role by

identifying projects that will bring together faculty, students, and community organizations to work on important social problems. This requires a priority-setting exercise that aligns the university's capacities and the community's needs. It may also require creating formal partnerships between the university and the community for purposes of raising funds for project implementation.

Willingness of Roma Valley Community to Engage with the Faculty of Agriculture

The study sought to assess the willingness of Roma Valley community to engage with the Faculty of Agriculture and the opinions of respondents regarding this aspect are summarized in Table 4. They reveal willingness of respondents to engage with the Faculty as reflected in: desire of the community to work together with the Faculty of Agriculture for mutual benefit (100%); desire of the community to exchange their wisdom for access to new ideas and knowledge (100%); desire of the community to acquire new knowledge and implement it practically in their own farming situations (100%); desire of the community to contribute to education of students (98%) and desire of the community to interact and communicate freely with the Faculty of Agriculture (98%).

The findings reveal that community members are indeed willing to engage with the Faculty of Agriculture. This is very significant since farmers are the principal agents of extension efforts. Their needs should be prioritized first before any other needs beyond their will can be satisfied.

It is a well-known fact that farmers offer full participation in the programmes in which they are involved first before their formulation and have a higher sense of ownership in such programmes. This denotes decentralized extension approach where extension programmes are planned with farmers rather than planning for them, thus farmers are involved in decision-making. Creating programmes with the people implies a broad view of people's involvement. Participation should not be seen as many times in the past, as the occasional presence of rural dwellers in an information meeting, the

simple use of public services, the voluntary contribution (with labour, money) to a project, or as some kind of activity to increase support to preplanned top-down projects (FAO, 1998).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Respondents recognized and acknowledge the outreach role of the Faculty of Agriculture in providing training to Roma Community members on a wide range of topics and subject areas. Respondents also indicated that Roma Valley community members require extension support on a wide range of issues and community members have great desire to engage with the Faculty of Agriculture in outreach activities. Opportunities exist for university-community engagement in Roma Valley which can provide training that matches well with the need of community for extension support and willingness to cooperate with the Faculty of Agriculture. It is therefore recommended that the Faculty of Agriculture should work with the community to develop and implement an outreach programme by adopting a problem-based rather than disciplinary-oriented approach in order to provide relevant outreach programme.

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