

EDITORIAL

Information is important for timely and effective agricultural production

Publisher: Botswana College of Agriculture, Gaborone,

One of the consistently mentioned constraints to increased agricultural productivity is lack of management skills. However, skills are usually obtained through training and acquiring information and knowledge. In order to improve the productivity of Botswana agricultural sector, it requires that all stakeholders empower the farmers with knowledge and information. Generally the government through its departments in the Ministry of Agriculture provides extension services which largely include educating farmers about farming techniques. Should this obligation rest only with the Ministry of Agriculture? The answer is no. Entities that benefit from doing business with farmers should also contribute in empowering farmers through education on how to produce that product that they (companies) seek from farmers. For instance Botswana Meat Commission (BMC) seeks beef of high quality to supply its overseas markets. The question is how do farmers know or get the knowledge/information about the mechanism of producing this high quality product (beef) under constantly changing customer preference and production environment? This information about beef quality and carcass characteristics, the methods of beef production and the choice of a breed, under challenging climatic and economic conditions needs to be easily accessed by farmers. And the responsibility is on BMC to ensure that it gets the product it desire by ensuring that information pertaining to beef (quality beef) production is made available to farmers. In this issue of BOJAAS the author Mahabile (page 75-81) investigated transactions costs of marketing cattle to BMC. One of the factors that influence transaction costs in selling cattle in Botswana has been identified by Nkhori (2004) as access to information. The study described in this issue of BOJAAS by Mahabile indicates that older farmers have reduced transaction costs. Older farmers, who through experience established markets contacts, are able to obtain market information without much hindrance. However, nowadays the agricultural industry is experiencing entrance by young farmers who are more internet technology savvy. These new breed of farmers are inquisitive and always uses the internet to search for information. I took the liberty to look at the BMC website and found that the cattle price list was post on the 10th March 2014, fourteen days before writing this editorial. Previously price list of cattle were posted in several local newspapers. Interestingly enough, BMC clients can register with the organization online, as producers, wholesaler or retailers. As a producer you will be able to

get updates on your mobile. The BMC Facebook page is updated as events and news concerning the beef industry un-fold. This is a good development, especially that young farmers use social media which is available on mobile device (smartphones and Tablets) for communication. However, BMC can help by posting extension messages, in addition to the announcements that appear on their Facebook page. In this regard the veterinarians and scientific officers at BMC can work with their public relation office which maintains the Facebook page to scout for the latest beef production technologies and distil these into simple and practical extension messages. In recent months there has been a debate on the increasing incidents of measles. Education on this should be posted on BMC website and on their Facebook page and even send to customers' mobiles. Botswana Television (BTV) can also be used to flight innovative advertisements about measles and how it is eating on farmers profits and the overall national beef income. Measles issue is a public health issue and should be pigbacked on existing Ministry of Health awareness programmes.

After browsing the BMC platforms I searched for the grain marketing board; Botswana Agricultural Marketing Board (BAMB). The price list on their website said it was valid until 30th September 2013. At the time of writing this editorial (24th March 2014) this price list was outdated even though it was entitled price list 2013/2014 which actually contradicted the warning at the bottom of the page which says it expires on 30/09/2013. Generally, farmers need to know prices for various crops, a season upfront. This is to enables them to do planting budget by planning different crop combination or amount of hectares that would results in optimum income when they supply the produce to the market. In the 1980s when I was studying at the University of Zimbabwe, Grain Marketing Board (Zimbabwe) was releasing grain prices a season ahead to allow farmers to plan their planting in accordance with anticipated income. And this was the norm. BAMB website had posting about the organization attendance of farmers' field days and agricultural show. It would be nice if they would also post photos of these events to make their web page more attractive. Besides the website, BAMB has Facebook and twitter accounts; however the Facebook was last updated on 23rd August 2013. Between then and now, a lot has happened in the agricultural industry at home, in the region and internationally. Rains were delayed in some areas, and in the north, the country experience unprecedented amount

of rains leading to floods with potential destruction of crops. The west of the country experienced more rains than average. What does this imply for crop quality and producer price that will be offered to farmers by BAMB? How can farmers mitigate against these challenges? How can farmers reduce damages due to excess rain, as well as avoid postharvest losses. Answers to these questions are important to clients of BAMB; the farmers. And BAMB has an obligation to give tips and answers and their website and Facebook pages are the best outlet for such communication.

The private sector has to complement government in furnishing information, including marketing information to producers, wholesalers and retailers, as well as to policy makers. In South Africa, banks which have a stake in agriculture through advancing credit to farmers make it their responsibility to provide price trends in international and domestic markets for beef, pork, poultry, crops and fruits. Banks like Absa (SA) contribute by posting these on Farmer's weekly and FNB (SA) on a newsletter called Agri-Weekly. FNB (SA) indicates that they provide this service because they recognize the important role and responsibilities that their nations' farmers as a business face every day. In Botswana financial institutions like NDB and CEDA has an huge interest in developing the agricultural sector and updating their client (farmers) with the latest market information would go a long way in improving farmers' decisions about marketing and trade.

When farmers has easy access to information both farmers and markets (BMC and BAMB) wins. The farmers reduce transaction costs and hence increase productivity and the markets get quality produce.

P/S We at BOJAAS just learnt, with great sadness, at the passing away of one of our authors in this current issue of this journal. The author Dr M. Mahabile wrote the first article in this issue on which this editorial was based on. May his soul found comfort in the Lord.

Literature cited

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