RURAL KNOWLEDGE - NEW PARADIGM TO DEVELOPMENT DEBATE

By
P Chaminuka, Prof A Belete and B Moholwa
Department of Agricultural Economics
University of the North

Introduction

The information revolution of the last two decades has brought to the fore the importance of knowledge and information in development. Undoubtedly part of the differences in development between nations and between communities can be attributed to the differences in access to information and knowledge. Having less access to information however does not entail having less knowledge. We argue in this paper that there is vast knowledge that exists in rural areas, which includes both traditional and modern knowledge. This knowledge is not fully utilized due to lack of complementary institutions and facilities that would enable rural people to utilize their knowledge to improve productivity. What is required is for development practitioners and policy makers to facilitate the dissemination of this rural knowledge, to enable sharing amongst community members, rather than spend scarce resources in bringing more and more new knowledge and information, which rural communities will not benefit from. Most of the knowledge that is required for rural development already exists in rural areas.

Background

Rural development is a process that is people centred and circumstance specific. Common parameters for rural development are indicators such as improved health facilities, infrastructure services, sanitation facilities, educational services and increased productivity.

Differences in access to information and knowledge account for much of the gaps between the developed and developing economies. Access to information enables people to attain better health standards and higher economic opportunities that improve prospects for poverty alleviation. The information revolution that occurred in the last two decades has brought new dimensions to the debate on development. Whilst the importance of information and knowledge in development is acknowledged, what remains undiscovered and unexploited is the wealth of information and knowledge that already exists in communities targeted for development. This article discusses the role of rural knowledge in development and distinguishes rural knowledge from indigenous knowledge, which is also important in development.

Rural Knowledge, Information and Indigenous Knowledge

Indigenous knowledge, defined as the ‘local knowledge’ that is unique to a given culture
or society (Warren, Slikkerveer and Bronkensha, 1995) is important in development as it forms the base for a society upon which communication and decision-making is facilitated. In comparison, rural knowledge is defined as ‘accumulated, embedded and imported knowledge among local actors about specific technologies, processes and markets’ (Munnich, Schrock and Cook, 2002). Rural knowledge is inclusive of both the indigenous knowledge and the conventional modern knowledge that exists among people in rural areas. Rural knowledge can either be formal (scientifically tested) or informal knowledge.

Because it already exists within the community, rural knowledge has numerous advantages for use in development. Solutions derived from existing rural knowledge have high probability of containing a high proportion of local or localized content, and will also likely build on existing systems such as indigenous knowledge, local sources of information and technology.

Whilst rural knowledge has several advantages, it has various shortcomings that may limit its applications. Rural knowledge is relatively less transferable given its socio-cultural specificities. This means it cannot be replicated elsewhere easily. Rural knowledge systems are not perfect, there is wide scope for improving the knowledge base of people in rural areas. Unlike other factors of production, knowledge can be used and reused at zero marginal cost (Munich et al, 2002), and has potential to offer endless growth, when compared with capital or labour. By utilizing existing rural knowledge development practitioners can help communities to enhance the productivity of existing factors of production. Where development projects are planned without due regard to existing knowledge systems, there is a high chance of failure of these projects.

Munnich et al (2002), studied rural knowledge clusters and noted that rural areas have lower educational levels and venture capital, and are less informed about patenting rights than metropolitan areas. This causes the rural areas to under perform in industries that utilize high technology, and in areas where education is translated into patenting. They further noted that rural areas often lack the necessary infrastructure and support to utilize existing knowledge during the process of development.

The existing rural knowledge has potential to give rise to innovative ideas, which are useful for community development. However, where innovative ideas already exist, there is often insufficient capital and opportunities to translate these ideas into active projects, and often it is a huge challenge to protect these ideas from use by others. Lack of access to markets is an impediment to poor people that desire to extract the benefits of their innovative ideas, using rural knowledge. People in rural areas need to be assisted to utilise their knowledge base by use of analytical tools and technologies that enable extraction of this knowledge for innovation.

The importance of creating an enabling environment through appropriate policies and establishment of institutions to provide capital and market access to rural communities cannot be downplayed in rural development. Where capital lacks, it is often difficult to explore and develop rural knowledge systems.
Rural Knowledge Centres: Experiences from India

Another challenge in ensuring that rural knowledge contributes to the development of communities is the effective dissemination of information. According to Munnich et al (2002), Botkin and Seeley noted that new technologies facilitate better information dissemination at better speed and across more areas, whilst knowledge clusters geographically. This they say is because knowledge is usually embedded in individuals, which makes it more difficult to transfer across space. Making good use of the rural knowledge is complicated by the fact that the bulk of the knowledge that exists within people or within communities is informal. Studies carried out by Sentilkumaran on rural knowledge centers of the M S Swaminathan Research Foundation in India showed that rural knowledge centers had significant implications for poverty alleviation.

The projects on rural knowledge centers facilitated the transformation, compilation, editing of external information, which would be integrated with local knowledge to make it useful within a local context. The projects used PRA to identify the information needs of the people. Several community members including women made use of these community knowledge centers to seek information on a wide variety of social and economic issues, and villagers also supplied information that they thought would be valuable to others. The rural knowledge centers also served as places for advertising job opportunities, and products on sale by community members. Information provided at the rural knowledge centres included input and output prices, health information, government social and economic programmes that could be accessed by communities, livestock diseases and transport facilities.

Rural Knowledge Centres: Applications to Africa

We believe that there is scope for establishment of such rural knowledge centres in sub Saharan Africa countries. These knowledge centres could go a long way in HIV/AIDS prevention and awareness programmes and other development programmes. The rural knowledge centres can also enhance knowledge creation and facilitate dissemination and sharing of information. This would empower local communities and enable them to improve their livelihoods. The Indian project showed that empowering poor people through access to timely and relevant information made a difference in their lives. What contributed to the success of this programme is that most of the information at the Rural Knowledge Centres was collected and compiled by the communities themselves. Whilst the Indian projects operated with computers and the internet, the rural knowledge centres established in sub Saharan Africa can start off small and expand as resources become available. The sub Sahara African model could focus on use of both traditional and non-traditional technologies to spread information on both rural knowledge and modern knowledge to communities.

Facilitating interaction between communities of different backgrounds, who actively seek to discuss problems and come up with home-grown solutions can result in sharing and dissemination of rural knowledge. The concept of rural knowledge is closely related to the farming systems perspective, which views the farm in a holistic manner and
considers interactions in the system (CGIR, 1978). Using rural knowledge farmers can be made to identify potential technological improvements, which are tested under location specific conditions.

Provision of information that is adaptable to local situations can go a long way in rural development. Use of Rural knowledge is participatory in nature and recognizes that the solutions to smallholder problems lie within the smallholder sector itself. Rather what is necessary is to provide the appropriate institutions and facilities that make the use of existing knowledge beneficial to smallholder farmers.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we reiterate that because the concept of rural knowledge is broader and more inclusive than indigenous knowledge, it has potential as part of the solution to sustainable development. Compilation and centralization of rural knowledge to facilitate access and sharing by community members enables rural communities to benefit from the vast rural and modern knowledge that is already existent in rural areas. What is required is for development practitioners and policy makers to facilitate the dissemination of this rural knowledge, to enable sharing amongst community members. Most of the knowledge that is required for rural development already exists in rural areas. The concept of rural knowledge presents opportunities for further research in rural development.

References


