

Innovative Training Program for Midcareer Agricultural Extension Staff: The Sasakawa Africa Fund Education Program

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SYNOPSIS

The Sasakawa Africa Fund Education Program builds capacity of midcareer practicing extension workers by enabling them to participate in degree programs. This opportunity enriches university understanding of field conditions and problems (leading to more focused curriculum content), benefits participating communities, enhances the status of the university in the agricultural sector and rural space, gives ministry of agriculture services greater credibility and effectiveness, and confers greater skills, status, and influence on midcareer extension workers—all of which is beneficial to the AIS. The process began in 1993 with cooperation between Ghana's Ministry of Food and Agriculture, the Sasakawa Africa Fund for Extension Education (SAFE), and Winrock International Institute for Agricultural Development. By January 2008, 2,292 students had benefited from the program. One key to the program's success was the Supervised Enterprise Projects (SEP) undertaken by each midlevel extension worker accepted to the program, which forged the links between extension, the university, and the community. The main lesson is that initiating a program of this type requires considerable discussion with higher-level decision makers and university managers so that the potential value of the program is understood. Agreement on program design is essential to ensure that the community attachment portion of the program (SEP) is implemented effectively. Careful selection of candidates for the degree program is vital. The financial lesson is that SEP is expensive to implement, as it requires supervision and travel for faculty and students.

CONTEXT

The persistence of formal teaching methods characterized by the lecture model is a generic weakness of agricultural

education, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, where students lack practical experience gained through demonstrations, field visits, and interactions with rural communities. University graduates who work in agriculture ministries and their subsidiary agencies often lack the skills and confidence to understand, respond to, and communicate effectively with sector stakeholders. To respond to this need and boost field experience in the leadership ranks of the extension service, Sasakawa Africa Association (SAA), an NGO funded by the Nippon Foundation, launched the Sasakawa Africa Fund for Extension Education (SAFE) (<http://www.safe-africa.net>), in 1993. A pilot program was implemented in Ghana in collaboration with Winrock International Institute for Agricultural Development, a nonprofit NGO based in the United States.

PROGRAM GOALS

The SAFE program has four objectives:

1. **Create midcareer training opportunities** to improve the technical and human relations skills of outstanding male and female field-based extension staff with certificates and diplomas in agriculture and related fields.
2. **Help reform agricultural extension curricula** in selected African universities. Coupled with this reform, participating universities are assisted to acquire relevant instructional materials and to network with other universities in the SAFE program to build strong pan-African academic partnerships. See also module 3.
3. **Develop agricultural leaders for extension organizations in sub-Saharan Africa.** This objective does not necessarily imply helping extension staff to occupy high positions within the extension organization. Rather, it means helping them achieve the more important goal of developing new, positive attitudes towards their work

and responsibilities and to become systems thinkers, catalysts, facilitators, and effective managers of change within their extension organizations.

4. ***In the long term, bring about institutional reform within African universities***, not only in the development of responsive agricultural extension curricula, but also in the wider institutions themselves.

In summary, SAFE strengthens the in-country capacity of African universities to be adaptable organizations that can develop client-focused training programs, acquire relevant core instructional materials in agricultural extension and related fields, mobilize internal and external resources to sustain the programs, and forge partnerships with other local and international institutions and agencies. Specific problems that SAFE addresses are (Zinnah 2003):

- Outdated extension curricula that do not reflect changing needs of providers and users of extension services, including the private sector.
- Inadequate off-campus, farmer- and client-focused practical training activities for students in agricultural colleges and universities.
- Lack of appreciation of the experience of midcareer extension professionals in the agricultural and rural development process.
- Lack of appreciation for midcareer professionals, especially certificate and diploma holders, as a prospective group of learners.
- Lack of appropriate training opportunities for midcareer extension staff.
- Lack of partnerships among agricultural colleges and universities and employers/clients of their graduates.

SAFE'S DEVELOPMENT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CAPE COAST, GHANA

To develop the SAFE pilot, in 1992 Ghana's Ministry of Food and Agriculture (MOFA) and its NGO partners requested the University of Cape Coast (UCC) to create a needs-based BSc degree program in agricultural extension for midcareer extension staff with diplomas and certificates (qualifications possessed by some 85 percent of Ghana's extension staff). These men and women would undertake the program on a leave of absence from their jobs and would return to work when they completed their studies.

The resulting program has two options. The basic option is a four-year program offered to extension workers who have passed a certificate course (two years of postsecondary

education). The second option is a two-year postdiploma program. Both programs lead to a BSc in Agricultural Extension.

Innovative elements

The program's innovative feature—aside from its focus on the untapped potential of midcareer professionals—was its off-campus Supervised Enterprise Project (SEP). After an initial period on campus, students return to their work environment to undertake a SEP for 4–6 months. These community-based experiences facilitate experiential learning as well as linkages between the major subsystems of the agricultural knowledge system: the farmer subsystem, which includes agribusiness, the extension and education subsystem, and the research subsystem. The SEP embodies the innovative link that connects the university and the community, thereby enhancing AIS interaction. Through the student extension workers, the SEP conveys community problems and successful practices to university researchers and enriches the curriculum.

Impacts of the Cape Coast program

The main beneficiaries of the SAFE Program are:

- ***Frontline extension staff of MOFA***, because without the program, they would have little chance to get a BSc, given the perceptions of diploma and certificate holders among university admission officers.
- ***Farmers***, because the SEPs concentrate on farmers' problems and have generated income-producing projects.
- ***Academic programs at the university***, which are exposed to real farming community problems and concerns.
- ***UCC***, through heightened visibility and links to MOFA, farmers, extension staff, NGOs, and District Assemblies. The university received international recognition for the innovative nature of the program.
- ***MOFA***, which gains an infusion of newly motivated staff with practical skills and experience who serve in key positions and supervise the work of other extension staff.

By 1999, 51 students (22 percent female) had completed BSc degrees; of these, 22 percent gained first-class honors. Seventy-six students, including three from Nigeria and one from Mozambique, were enrolled (29 percent were female); 51 were certificate and 25 were diploma holders. The participation of the women in particular should increase the gender balance in the upper levels of the extension service.

A seven-member Consultative Committee was formed with representatives from MOFA, UCC, SAA/Winrock, and farmers/agribusiness to provide recommendations, including recommendations for fund raising. Greater interaction was fostered between field staff of some bilateral agencies and NGOs, UCC, and students because of the SEP.

By January 2008, 246 enrollees at UCC had obtained BSc degrees and 231, a diploma. At the same time, 81 persons were enrolled in the degree program and 112 in the diploma program.

WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF SAFE IN AFRICA?

It is becoming evident that partnerships are the only solution to the multifaceted problem of training Africa's agricultural extension staff. In extension education (in fact, throughout the AIS), the tradition of working alone in a competitive rather than a collaborative mode is no longer valid. No single player has the capacity to cover all education and training needs, and partnerships with donor agencies will continue to be critical in this poorly resourced area.

The motives and methods of the SAFE program resonated with African universities outside Ghana. Following the UCC pilot, other universities in Ghana and elsewhere joined, including: Kwadaso Agricultural College (Ghana); the University of Abomey-Calavi (Benin); the Polytechnic University of Bobo-Dioulasso (Burkina Faso), Alemaya University of Agriculture and Hawassa University (Ethiopia); the Rural Polytechnic Institute of Training and Applied Research and Samako Agricultural Institute (Mali); Bunda College of Agriculture (Malawi); Ahmadu Bello University and Bayero University (Nigeria); Sokoine University of Agriculture (Tanzania); and Makerere University (Uganda).¹ Donor support for the SAFE program was lengthy (UCC Ghana, the pioneer university, was supported from 1992 to 2002), but once universities and diploma-granting institutions accumulated sufficient experience with running the new curriculum, direct support ended.

A number of lessons were learned as SAFE expanded to new settings. Perhaps the most important lesson was that the seemingly impossible task of bridging the technical-professional gap in civil service employment could be solved for midcareer, technically qualified extension staff.

A relevant program that shows positive results creates further demand among academic entities and potential enrollees.

Including a practical stage (the SEP) in the program was central to success, because it fostered the alliances that spread the benefits to all participants. Communities gained from the external contacts. Ministries of agriculture gained better-trained staff with more field experience, which made their contribution to sector development more effective. Universities gained greater community visibility and access to real rural training settings and challenges, and university research programs and curricula were enriched to reflect changes in agriculture on the ground.

Aspects of the program can be improved. The four-year certificate program is too long for some midcareer workers who would be content with a diploma rather than a degree. The program also needs more diversity, especially with respect to female recruits, but the pool of midcareer women extension workers for the program remains small.

One lesson for implementing this kind of program is that the need for qualified and committed core staff is paramount. The lack of such staff has been a big constraint, affecting not only the implementation but the long-term sustainability of the program. Because the SAFE concept is new to the university and the extension service, administrative and academic staff members must be oriented to it. University staff members must acquire the improved pedagogical methods and skills to better meet midcareer students' learning needs. The acquisition of such skills is facilitated by staff involvement in the SAFE program through team teaching and joint supervision of SEPs.

Financing is crucial. SAFE, with its strong off-campus focus, is expensive to run, even if the returns on investment are large. A clear exit strategy for the funding partners is vital to enable the university to develop its own means of continuing the program. In Ghana, MOFA is considering including the SAFE program in its budget. Incentives also help universities adopt the program. At UCC, for example, a multipurpose building (the Sasakawa Center) was completed and is used to generate income for the SAFE program at the university. It remains vital to build constituencies that can pressure decision makers on behalf of the university; some administrators continue to regard SAFE as extra work rather than a strategic necessity.