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THE NEED FOR AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION SERVICES FOR MUNICIPAL COMMONAGE FARMERS

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ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on the agricultural skills of black and coloured "emergent" farmers using municipal commonage land in South Africa. This paper is based on in-depth interviews with 28 commonage users, undertaken in Philippolis in the Southern Free State. The farmers are typically of modest financial means, and with a limited exposure to agriculture. The paper reflects on their livestock holdings, the amount of money they spend on their agricultural enterprises, and their reasons for farming. The profound need for agricultural guidance and extension services for these farmers is highlighted, because many of these farmers have no background in farming at all. Their current source of knowledge is primarily from their previous white commercial farming employers, and to a lesser extent, from their peers. The Department of Agriculture hardly features as a support institution, which raises far-reaching questions about the adequacy of current agricultural extension systems.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the southern provinces of South Africa, municipalities own vast tracts of agricultural land. This phenomenon is primarily found in rural towns in the Western Cape, Eastern Cape, Northern Cape and the Free State. 'Municipal commonages' originated at the time that towns were formally established, usually in the 19th and early 19th centuries. The land was available for the use of the towns' residents, typically to keep animals for slaughter, draught animals, and milch cows.

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Historically, commonage land was generally reserved only for white residents. By the mid-20th Century, white urban residents tended to lose interest in small-scale agriculture, and commonages were increasingly let to commercial farmers, at market-related rentals.

After 1996, municipalities increasingly chose to terminate the leases with commercial farmers, and they began making the land available to the new class of urban poor – the urban black and coloured residents. The legal arrangements are still often unclear or inadequate, and in most cases, the black farmers use the land communally, as informal groups. The commonage users are required to pay rentals to the municipalities. Such rentals are often effectively subsidised (they are at much lower level that conventional commercial land rentals), and in many cases, the commonage users do not pay these rentals at all. This paper reflects on the situation of black and coloured "emergent farmers", who keep livestock on municipal commonage.

This paper is based on in-depth interviews with 28 commonage users, undertaken in Philippolis in the Southern Free State. Given our experience dealing with commonage farmers in other Karoo towns, these findings are likely to be roughly similar, because the commonage users are typically local black or coloured residents, of modest financial means, and with a limited exposure to agriculture. The paper shows the profound need for agricultural guidance and extension services for these farmers, many of whom have no background in farming at all. Many commonage farmers are unemployed (do not have formal jobs), or undertake small informal trades. Before 1996, no black or coloured residents could undertake farming operations, with the result that the only commonage farmers with any kind of farming experience are ex-farm workers.

The paper also raises future challenges for extension officers as regards commonage users. Not only will extension officers need much better technical and business skills than they have at present, but they will also need to become effective negotiators with municipalities, producers' organisations, marketing institutions and commercial farmers' unions, in order to assist commonage users to build partnerships with other organisations. Commonage farmers' needs are multiple and basic, as they strive to establish themselves in a trade with which they are unfamiliar. Consequently, extension officers have to

relate to a wide diversity of needs, ranging from production to marketing, infrastructure maintenance and legal issues.

2. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MUNICIPAL COMMONAGE IN SOUTH AFRICA

Municipal commonage in South Africa covers vast tracts of land. A survey of municipalities, conducted by Buso (2003), found that there are at least 112 795 ha of municipal commonage in the Free State. The figure for Northern Cape is approximately 1 641 433 ha (Benseler: 2003). Figures are not available for other provinces, although commonage is a typical feature of Western Cape and Eastern Cape towns.

During the 19th Century and most of the 20th Century, commonage land was used by local white urban residents, to keep small numbers of livestock and horses (Ingle 2006: 47). With the proliferation of motorised cars and services such as butcheries, the local white residents gradually lost interest in commonage use. By the 1980s, it was a common feature for municipalities to lease their commonage to white commercial farmers, and this brought in valuable municipal revenue. All this changed by the mid-1990s, when a new class of black urban residents began to take interest in small-scale farming and subsistence livelihoods.

An important issue affecting commonage development in these areas is the rapid urbanisation of the past 15 years. In 1996, South Africa's rural population was 44.9 %, and by 2001, this had declined to 42.5% of South Africa's total population (StatsSA, 2001: 8). The rural population had decreased by 830 000 people. Thousands of farm workers lost their jobs, as farmers cut labour costs due to the impacts of globalisation and farmers' fears about government land tenure policies (Simbi and Aliber: 2000), as well as factors such as mechanisation, minimum wages, and new labour laws. Between 1991 and 2001, the annual growth rate of population in the small towns in the Free State was almost 9% (Marais 2004). Many of these new townsfolk are ex-farm workers, although there has also been migration from Lesotho and the Eastern Cape to the Karoo towns.

The influx of people into the small towns has substantially increased the pressure on municipal commonage, as the increasing numbers of urban poor want to use this resource to maintain their livelihoods.

Philippolis was one of the first municipalities in the Free State to make commonage available for local black stock-holders. The municipal commonage of 3 491 ha is divided into five camps and used for livestock farming. Buso (2003) gives a picture of the conditions prevailing on the commonage. Users of the commonage are organised into a stock committee, then consisting of 35 members. Access to the commonage land is fairly easy. People who used to work for commercial farmers but who had lost their jobs are welcome to join the committee. By 2005, the number of commonage users has increased to about 55. This is, by default, an "open access" system, and is certainly unsustainable in the medium- and long-term.

The increase in the number of commonage farmers on many commonages, together with weak municipal land management, has meant that overgrazing has become prevalent. Buso (2003) found that 17 of the municipalities in the Free State reported some degree of environmental degradation of the commonage including overgrazing and erosion. This is due to the limited amount of commonage land available to small farmers, as well as poor management, incorrect carry capacity, and basic infrastructure such as water, and camps. However, the lack of municipal land management plans also contributes to overgrazing.

3. THE PHILIPPOLIS SURVEY

In the Philippolis survey, conducted in May 2005**,** a total of 28 commonage farmers were interviewed. This represented half the current commonage users. Table 1 shows their employment profile:

Table 1: Employment profile of Philippolis commonage users

Employment status	**Number of users**	**Percentage of users**
Full-time	11	39
Odd jobs / piece work	5	18
Retired / unemployed	12	43
Total	**28**	**100.0**

The majority of the users are unemployed or retired, suggesting that their use of the commonage may well be a hedge against destitution. But an almost equal number of commonage users had other sources of permanent income. This suggests that commonage users do not constitute one economic class.

The commonage land in Philippolis is used exclusively for livestock ownership, with no cultivation taking place. Of the 28 interviewees, the majority (20 people) own large stock (cattle). Sixteen people own small stock, such as sheep and goats. Ten people own pigs, and two people own horses and donkeys (mainly for transport purposes).

The number of livestock owned by these farmers differs widely:

Table 2: Categories of livestock ownership

Livestock ownership category	Number of users	Percentage of users
Up to 10 head of livestock	16	57
Between 11 and 30 head of livestock	6	21
Between 31 and 100 head of livestock	4	4
More than 100 head of livestock	2	7

In the Philippolis survey, all the commonage farmers (with the exception of one) wanted to increase their livestock. Table 3 shows that people use commonage for a wide variety of reasons:

Table 3: Reasons for commonage use in Philippolis

Reasons for farming (multiple responses allowed)	Number of mentions	Percent
Additional income/commercial reasons	13	36
Personal progress	2	6
Customary practice	2	6
Emotional commitment ("I love to farm"/ "I love my animals")	13	36
Long term investment	2	6
To gain farming knowledge	4	11
Total	**36**	**100**

This complexity suggests that some commonage users may wish to farm commercially, whereas others may prefer to farm primarily for subsistence, or for recreational or cultural reasons.
Table 4 shows that commonage farmers spend widely divergent amounts of money on livestock medicines, supplements and infrastructure:

Table 4: Annual amounts spent on farming requirements (2005 figures)

Total expenses	Number of responses
R0-100	8
R101-500	8
R501-R1000	3
R1001-R2000	6
More than R2000	3

Most commonage users (18 people, or 64% of the survey) had not sold livestock in the previous year. A relatively small number (6 farmers, or 21%) had sold between 1 and 10 head of livestock, and an even smaller group (4 farmers, or 14% of the survey) had sold more than 10 head of livestock. Clearly, stock sales are not a major feature of commonage use. Commonage farmers are more oriented to the accumulation of livestock than engaging in commercial agricultural activities. This suggests that commonage farmers would benefit from more guidance regarding the marketing of their livestock.

4. KNOWLEDGE BASE OF COMMONAGE FARMERS

The interviews posed several questions to test commonage farmers' knowledge of basic farming practices.

4.1 Knowledge of stock diseases, medication and supplements

Knowledge of *stock diseases* was taken as one indicator of people's knowledge about farming. Interviewees were asked an open-ended question about what diseases can affect cattle, sheep, goats and pigs. Based on their answers, respondents were categorized as having a poor level of knowledge (0-1 correct answers), fair knowledge (2-4 correct answers), and good knowledge (more than four correct answers.

The results show that, of the 28 farmers, 13 had poor knowledge, 13 had fair knowledge, and only 2 had good knowledge. This indicates that the vast majority of farmers have little experience of managing livestock diseases. There was no close correlation between the size of farmers' enterprises, and their level of knowledge of diseases:

Table 5: Livestock owners and knowledge of diseases

Category	Poor know-ledge	Fair know-ledge	Good knowledge	Total
Survivalists (1-10 animals)	8	7	1	16
Micro farmers (11-30 animals)	3	3	0	6
Emergent farmers (31-100 animals)	1	2	1	4
Proto-capitalist farmers (more than 100 animals)	1	1	0	2

The farmers were also asked what type of *medicine* can be applied. In this case, only two categories were used: poor knowledge (0-1 correct answers), and fair knowledge (more than 2 correct answers). Twenty-two farmers had poor knowledge, and 6 had fair knowledge. The degree of knowledge (or lack of it) was distributed fairly evenly amongst the four categories of farmers.

Finally, the farmers were asked about the kinds of *supplements* they could give their animals. Only one farmer had more than four correct responses, placing him in the category of good level of knowledge. Nine farmers had a fair level of knowledge, while the vast majority (18 farmers) had poor knowledge.

These findings indicate that the majority of commonage users know little about stock management, even when they own fairly large numbers of livestock (often more than 30 animals). Consequently, it is likely that these animals are in poor condition, which is likely to reduce their market value, and detract from the farmers' potential profitability.

Probably the most significant finding is that all the commonage users who had *never* lived on a farm, had a poor level of knowledge of stock diseases. This is not surprising, since they would not have had an opportunity to learn about it. Of the 23 users who had lived on a farm, 8 had poor knowledge, 13 had fair knowledge, and two had a good knowledge. It is rather sobering that eight people had lived on a farm before, and still had a poor knowledge of stock diseases. It is likely that these workers had not been provided with technical knowledge by their employers.

Of the 22 people who had previously lived on a farm, 17 people had a poor knowledge of medicines, and 5 people had a fair knowledge. This suggests that some farm workers are given little opportunity to learn about livestock medicines. But even their mediocre showing is much better than those people who had never lived on a farm, and who had uniformly poor knowledge of livestock medicines. The same conclusions can be reached with regards to knowledge about nutritional supplements.

Table 6: Level of knowledge related to previous residence on farms

Category	Previous residence on farm	
	Yes	**No**
Poor knowledge	17	5
Fair knowledge	6	0

The implications of this for extension services are profound. On the one hand, those commonage users who do not have a farm background, have learnt about livestock management *ab initio*. Even some ex-farm workers have very little knowledge. A great deal of training and mentoring needs to be provided. Curiously, commonage farmers do not seem to learn much from each other, as Table 6 below illustrates. This suggests that their faming operations are run independently, even though the land is used communally.

The findings also show significant differences in commonage users' levels of knowledge, a factor which will have to be taken into account when structuring individual or group-based extension services.

4.2 Source of knowledge and support

From the open-ended interviews, we identified two possible ways of learning about agriculture: From a commercial farmer (usually, but not invariably, previously an employer), and from one's family. The following table shows that knowledge derived from commercial farmers is overwhelmingly more important.

Table 7: Source of agricultural and ecological knowledge

Source of knowledge	Number	Percentage
On white farm / from white farmer	18	64.3
Parents / grandparents	6	21.4
No one	2	7.1
Other commonage users	2	7.1
Total	**28**	**100.0**

This finding echoes the information derived from Buso (2004: 62). Emerging farmers indicated that they have good working relations with white commercial farmers who advise them on farming related issues. For example, some commonage users co-operate with a commercial farmer who transports their goats to the Kimberley market.

The linkages between the commonage users and the commercial farmers are strong. Twenty of the interviewees (71%) had previously worked on a farm. Only 5 people (20%) were born in Philippolis, and 3 people (11%) had come from another town. Furthermore, the majority of the interviewees (18 people) had acquired their livestock from a white farmer.

We were also interested in the extent to which commonage users taught each other. An open-ended question was asked about commonage users' learning patterns:

The most remarkable feature of these tables is what was *not* said. At no stage did any commonage user mention that he or she received technical support or knowledge from an agricultural extension officer.

Other research confirmed the need for providing training to Philippolis commonage farmers. Members of the stock committee further expressed the need to undergo skills development programmes (Buso

Table 8: Learning from peers

Responses: Do you learn from other emergent farmers?	Number	Percent
No	12	42.9
Yes – from other commonage farmers/friends/peers	7	25.0
Other farm workers	9	32.1
Total	**28**	**100.0**

2003: 62), but development programmes in Kopanong Municipality are few and far between The uneven nature of extension services was also noted in a recent report (Atkinson *et al* 2005: 53), where three out of nine towns in Kopanong Municipality apparently do not receive any extension services at all.

In her study of commonages in the Northern Cape, Anja Benseler found that many municipalities do not obtain any support from the Department of Agriculture (Benseler, 2004: 43). This could be due to at least two factors. Firstly, there was a real lack of involvement of the extension officers with the municipalities and emergent farmers. Secondly, many the municipalities are not even *aware* of the existence of an agricultural extension officer, as was the case in Kareeberg Municipality where the municipality was unaware of the help that the emergent farmers were receiving from the extension officer.

4.3 Knowledge needs

The Philippolis commonage users were asked an open-ended question about what kind of agricultural knowledge has been most useful to them. The vast majority thought that knowledge of livestock, diseases and feeding was most important:

Table 9: Importance of different types of knowledge for farming

Type of agricultural knowledge	Number of mentions	Percent
Livestock/diseases/feeding	16	48.5
Veld and pasture	2	6.1
Infrastructure	3	9.1
Right attitude	6	18.2
None	6	18.2
Total	**33**	100.0

5. CHALLENGES FOR EXTENSION OFFICERS

Extension services are clearly in urgent need for commonage users. Training, mentoring and technical advice to commonage users has been sadly lacking in many towns. A much stronger knowledge base is needed, to include both agricultural and environmental issues. It is important that formal training courses should be offered regularly (i.e. not a "once-off"), so that commonage users (and in particularly, new entrants on the commonage) receive regular updates, and positive messages are reinforced.

However, agricultural extension services in towns like Philippolis are facing a double challenge. Firstly, the lack of support to commonage farmers suggests that extension officers are not adequately skilled, experienced or involved. This echoes the finding by Duvel (2004: 2) that under-performance of extension officers could be due to insufficient competence or support, and that their impact has deteriorated significantly. Secondly, extension officers who hope to assist commonage farmers will have to engage municipalities too, because municipalities are the owners of the land and are responsible for sustainable environmental management. It is likely that municipalities' knowledge of environmental management is inadequate, especially because few municipalities have appointed environmentalists.

The latter issue opens a further set of difficulties. According to Schedules 4 and 5 of the Constitution, which stipulate municipal functions, agriculture is *not* a municipal function. Municipalities have never been responsible for dealing with emergent farmers, and do not have the skills to provide such support. Agricultural extension officers will therefore be crucially important in facilitating the relationship between commonage users and municipalities, to draft appropriate contracts, management systems, and monitoring systems. This will be in addition to their function of providing agricultural mentoring to commonage farmers directly.

There are serious doubts whether extension officers are being prepared for this challenge. One positive example however, hails from Letsemeng Municipality (Koffiefontein area, in south-western Free State), where the Department of Agriculture brokered a contractual system between the commonage farmers and the municipality. This

example will have to be replicated in every municipality which owns commonage. This will mean that the extension officers will need extensive briefing on legal lease options and communal management systems – at a time when land demand exceeds supply, and much commonage land is already over-utilised. Extension officers need to assist municipalities to figure out appropriate lease arrangements. For example, there are major differences between *leasing land parcels* to commonage users, and allowing commonage users to pay rental *per head of livestock. This* challenge will have to be faced head-on by provincial Departments of Agriculture, because it raises important questions regarding the constitutional interface between agriculture and municipal governance.

Furthermore, day-to-day mentoring should supplement formal training. South Africa is fortunate to have a very dynamic and resilient class of commercial farmers, many of whom have indicated their willingness to support emergent farmers. Such relationships should be proactively established by extension officers and by municipalities. Commercial farmers and NGOs should be paid for their training and mentoring activities. Such funding can be drawn from the municipality's commonage budget line item. If this is insufficient, provincial DoA offices should be encouraged to budget for such activities.

As the World Bank has argued, agricultural growth for the poor will require new pubic service skills in partnership-building between ministries, levels of government, community organisations and producers' organisations (World Bank 2005: 104).

6. CONCLUSION

The paper has highlighted the serious need for training, mentoring and extension services on the part of commonage users in Philippolis. Until now, the only source of support has been nearby commercial farmers. This points to the urgent need for more effective extension services, which must not only improve the conventional form of extension (technical guidance of farmers), but must also broker new partnerships between commonage users, municipalities, and other support organisations. Given the importance of commonage farming for local livelihoods, this is an urgent task for provincial Departments of Agriculture to undertake.

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