

## *Inequalities in agricultural support for women in South Africa*

### **Introduction**

Post-1994, the South African government's national and provincial departments of agriculture (DOA) made concerted efforts to develop policies and programmes aimed at making South Africa's agricultural sector stronger and more robust. Crucial to this strategy was to increase the equity among farmers in terms of racial and gender representation and access to land, modern technologies and other inputs. As this process unfolded it received criticism from many quarters. The succession of the many post-1994 policies and programmes, including the *1995 White Paper on Agriculture*, the *1998 Agricultural Policy in South Africa* discussion document, the *2001 Strategic Plan for South African Agriculture* and the *2004 Comprehensive Agricultural Support Programme*, has exemplified the criticism that there is an evident shift away from supporting the poor and more vulnerable farmers, especially female farmers, towards an overwhelming focus on the better-resourced and more commercially-oriented black farmers (Hall et al. 2003; Hart 2008, 2011).

The current support provided by the government to smallholder farmers promotes the adoption of new technologies, but does not pay attention to the diversity of farmers in a range of circumstances. In order for new

technologies to work, farmers need access not only to land, but also to education, technologies that suit their farming needs and appropriate agricultural extension support. Gender and gender dynamics inherent in agricultural production need to be taken into account if women farmers are not to continue being marginalised members of the rural development community. More so than men, women are confronted with a range of challenging cultural and socioeconomic factors (for example, low levels of education), which limits their ability to take advantage of new opportunities. Therefore, simply including women as recipients of projects will not provide them with the support that they need to build and sustain viable farming enterprises. This situation is made worse by the limited access to agricultural support to farmers in general.

This brief, drawn from several studies since 2005 in which the authors were involved, as well as an analysis of the 2009 General Household Survey (GHS), shows the challenges women farmers face in accessing the type of support they need and makes policy recommendations.<sup>1</sup>

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1 This policy brief is based on the paper by the authors: Hart T & Aliber M (2010) The need for an engendered approach to agricultural technology. *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity* 84: 75–90.

At home we grow traditional crops [maize, African leafy vegetables, groundnuts, cowpeas, Bambara nuts]. Cash crops [lettuce, cabbage, tomatoes, etc.] do not grow well at home because we have no money for fertilisers and seed and we have no water.  
(Female farmer in eastern Limpopo)

## **The current role of agricultural technology in underpinning rural economic development**

It is generally accepted that primary agricultural production plays an important role in rural development, including contributing to household food and nutrition security (Aliber & Hart 2009) and multiplier effects that stimulate the rural and national economy (Deininger 2003; Lipton 1976, 1993). Key to the South African government's post-1994 policies and programmes is the commitment to increase the equity among farmers in terms of racial and gender representation and access to land, modern technologies (new crop and livestock varieties, agrochemicals) and other inputs (Vink & Van Rooyen 2009). More recently the *New Growth Path* (Economic Development Department, EDD 2010) and *Vision 2030* (National Planning Commission, NPC 2011) have proposed agriculture as a key driver of rural economic development and job creation.

## **Agricultural support for women**

South Africa's public agricultural services have pursued a delivery approach based on fundamentally top-down transfer of technology (TOT) models. The TOT approach is not participatory and promotes the delivery and adoption of universally designed modern technologies in order to improve productivity and increase output, without considering the relevance of local circumstances, such as local knowledge, resource endowments and aspirations. The most common technologies transferred are 'spillover technologies', which had originally been developed for the large-scale and well-resourced commercial farming sector. The primary focus has been to support the black farming sector in South Africa, but with an implementation bias towards more commercially-oriented black farmers

who are better able to use spillover technologies (DOA 2001; Hall et al. 2003; Hart 2008, 2011).

Such an approach does not sufficiently acknowledge the diversity of the farmers targeted and of their circumstances. Awareness of the diversity within the smallholder sector is vital and technology needs to be developed and adjusted to the differences in the skills, resources, motivations and objectives of rural households that engage in some form of agriculture. Tripp (2001) argues that given the diversity of rural households, the development and delivery of technology is not a guaranteed answer to rural development. Although well-resourced commercial farmers require new technologies to increase their productivity and competitiveness, other farmers see agriculture as a safety net for their diversified livelihood portfolios. The prevalence and poverty of this latter group requires that attention be paid to technologies to improve their efficiency and protect the natural resources over which they have stewardship, and this must be done within the parameters of the group's socioeconomic situation. This presents a particular challenge for women farmers who differ from their male counterparts in terms of household and cultural status and this, in turn, influences motivations for farming, land access and education levels.

The quotes in the margins of this policy brief reflect the diversity of the females in the sector.

## **Profile of black female farmers in South Africa**

### **Motivations for farming**

Figure 1 shows that women represent almost two-thirds of those engaged in some form of agriculture. By far the majority of those involved in agriculture

They [men] are responsible for livestock [cattle] and we [women] plant the crops mainly for food. We farm to eat as well as to sell; we normally sell what is left over.  
(Female farmer in northern KwaZulu-Natal)

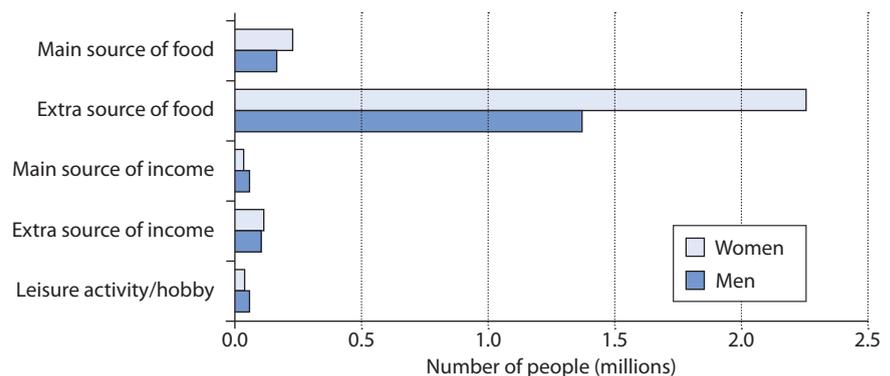
do it primarily as a main source or extra source of household food. In these two categories women exceed men by 37% and 65%, respectively. Only in commercial farming are the numbers of women and men roughly equal (represented in Figure 1 as main or extra source of income). Otherwise women far exceed men when farming is done to produce household food. The fact that there are many more women than men involved in farming largely owes to the much larger number of women relative to men who farm within male-headed households (954 000 versus 315 000).<sup>\*</sup> While these women farming within male-headed households are still outnumbered by women household heads who farm, it still means that a major and arguably under-recognised clientele for agricultural support services are women agriculturalists within male-headed households. Male and female agricultural roles and responsibilities may well be different

as women are generally responsible for food supply irrespective of the gender of the household head. Underlining this point is the fact that of these women agriculturalists within male-headed households, in about 40%<sup>\*</sup> of the cases, the male household head is not himself active in agriculture.

### Access to land

Equitable access to land in South Africa is a burning political, emotional and developmental issue. The 2009 GHS collected information about the location of crop farming among farming households (Table 1). While some farming households use land around school gardens and on road verges, more than 80% farm on backyard garden plots; a further 12% to 14% use 'farm land', most of which is presumably communal land. There is little to distinguish in this regard between female-headed and male-headed households.

**Figure 1:** Gender distribution of black farmers, by 'main reason' for farming



Source: Labour Force Survey, March 2007 (Stats SA 2007)

**Table 1:** Where black households engage in crop production, by gender of household head, 2009

	Female-headed households		Male-headed households	
	Number	Percentage share	Number	Percentage share
Farm land (communal or private)	146 092	12%	165 332	14%
Backyard garden	978 813	82%	986 824	81%
School garden	17 381	1%	22 709	2%
Communal garden	34 078	3%	27 240	2%
On verges and unused public land	16 498	1%	20 883	2%
All	1 192 862	100%	1 222 988	100%

Source: General Household Survey, 2009 (Stats SA 2010)

Note: Due to rounding done during calculations, the percentage share columns do not add up to 100%.

<sup>\*</sup> Not reported in Figure 1.

The support staff [extension and research officials] that comes here forgets that people around these parts aren't educated; they impart the knowledge that many might not necessarily understand.

(Second female farmer in northern KwaZulu-Natal)

## Education

Based on the 2009 GHS, Table 2 reveals that about one-quarter of women household heads have no formal schooling, versus about 19% of men household heads, and while 54% of male household heads of farming households have no more than a primary school education, 61% of female household heads are in this situation.

The low levels of education attained by female farmers are cause for great concern. This is especially so when government interventions primarily aim at delivering spillover technologies from the commercial farming sector to small-scale and largely subsistence practitioners, most of whom are female. Education is crucial to enable end users to adopt and make optimal use of new technologies.

Conventional and new technologies (such as biotechnology and genetically modified inputs) are primarily targeted at emerging commercial farmers and require new management skills. As a result the education levels of farmers will need to be boosted, especially as farmers engage in more sophisticated input and output markets. Similarly, the existing extension services personnel will need to improve their skills and knowledge in respect of current and future technologies – like the rural education systems, the extension services are currently inadequate for the present and the future requirements.

## Weak extension services and limited access to government support

There has been an increasing recognition within government that the extension services lack not only the numbers of personnel to reach the large volume of black farmers in South Africa (DOA 2008; Düvel 2003), but more importantly they lack the skills to support the diverse types of black farmers (large-scale commercial, small-scale commercial and small-scale subsistence) that feature in the current landscape. The overwhelming majority of these farmers are women producing crops for household consumption on smallhold food plots. Interestingly, while 73% of all extension officers are men, in six out of nine provinces female extension officials possess higher qualifications than their male counterparts (DOA 2008). Gender ratios and skills of extension officials need to be commensurate with the farmers they serve. Of greatest concern is the extremely small share of agriculturally-active households who received training or extension (it should be noted that the wording of the GHS questionnaire only asked about 'visits from extension officers', whereas in reality farmers' encounters with extension officers can occur in different places, so this figure may not be completely accurate). Even so, apart from access to livestock health services, the picture presented in Table 3 is quite sobering. For commercially-oriented black farming households, the situation is somewhat better, as one might expect; however,

**Table 2:** Level of education of female and male household heads involved in agriculture, 2009

Level of education	Female household heads		Male household heads	
	Number	Percentage share	Number	Percentage share
No schooling	33 518	26%	252 406	19%
Primary schooling	452 618	35%	462 284	35%
Secondary schooling	425 682	33%	532 525	40%
Tertiary	63 621	5%	84 902	6%
All	975 439	100%	1 332 117	100%

Source: General Household Survey, 2009 (Stats SA 2010)

Note: Due to rounding done during calculations, the percentage share columns do not add up to 100%.

**Table 3:** Black agriculturally-active households receiving agricultural support services, 2009

	Number of agric-active HHs receiving support in previous year	As share of all agric-active black HHs	Number of C-O agric-active HHs receiving support in previous year*	As share of all C-O agric-active black HHs*
Training	50 806	1.9%	7 164	17.4%
Visits from extension officers	47 077	1.8%	5 604	13.6%
Grants	5 236	0.2%	615	1.5%
Loans	3 822	0.1%	1 049	2.5%
Inputs as part of a loan	7 752	0.3%	742	1.8%
Inputs for free	52 377	2.0%	1 219	3.0%
Livestock health services	262 568	10.0%	6 407	15.6%
Other	1 773	0.1%	278	0.7%
Any one or more of the above	339 805	12.9%	13 315	32.4%

\*'C-O agric-active' means 'commercially-oriented agriculturally-active', as determined by those who indicated that they sold most of what they produced.

Source: General Household Survey, 2009 (Stats SA 2010)

it is still far from encouraging – only one-third of these households received any form of direct agricultural support service in the 12-month period ending October 2009.

If we compare agricultural support received by female-headed and male-headed agriculturally-active black households (Table 4), we see that while male-headed households benefit from very little support across most

types of support services, the situation among female-headed households is even worse. Overall, a male-headed farming household is about 14% more likely to receive at least some kind of support than a female-headed one. For grants – which, of course, very few farmers receive anyway – a male-headed household is three times more likely to benefit than a female-headed household.

**Table 4:** Black agriculturally-active households receiving agricultural support services, by gender of household head, 2009

	Number of agric-active FHHs receiving support in previous year		Number of agric-active MHHs receiving support in previous year		Ratio of MHHs receiving to FHHs*
	Number	Share	Number	Share	
Training	18 874	1.47%	31 932	2.36%	1.60
Visits from extension officers	22 415	1.75%	24 662	1.83%	1.04
Grants	1 251	0.10%	3 985	0.30%	3.02
Loans	1 482	0.12%	2 339	0.17%	1.42
Inputs as part of a loan	3 454	0.27%	4 298	0.32%	1.18
Inputs for free	27 123	2.12%	25 254	1.87%	0.88
Dipping and vaccination services for stock	116 524	9.10%	146 044	10.81%	1.19
Other	260	0.02%	1 513	0.11%	5.52
Any one or more of the above	154 665	12.08%	185 140	13.71%	1.14

\* To be precise, this is a comparison of the share of men-headed households receiving a particular form of support relative to the share of women-headed households receiving that form of support; e.g. for training,  $1.60 = 2.36\% / 1.47\%$ .

Source: General Household Survey, 2009 (Stats SA 2010)

## **Government support for black women farmers: Two case studies**

Compounding the impact of poor support services is the fact that researchers and extensionists, who are the backbone of agricultural development in South Africa, lack sufficient communication, gender awareness and people-oriented skills. They need basic training in these skills and disciplines in order to comprehend the realities encountered at the farm and household level to enable them to develop appropriate technologies and provide suitable services required by diverse types of farmers. Conventional agricultural training in its current form is often inadequate to people's realities. Interviews conducted with female producers in Capricorn District, Limpopo, and Bergville District, KwaZulu-Natal, provide some interesting findings regarding the needs for support and the experience of women receiving government-supported technology transfer.

In a Limpopo village, female producers were being reached by extension services in limited numbers as they had to be members of one of the two vegetable garden projects. Extension services only focused on these garden projects and provided limited infrastructural (fencing, irrigation by means of borehole and reservoir) and technical support required for commercial farming activities (seedlings, necessary agrochemicals). The focus was on vegetable crops that required expensive inputs, monocropping and irrigation, such as lettuce, beetroot, tomatoes, butternut, carrots, green beans and cabbage. Women reported that the problem with the advice received was that it was not replicable in their household gardens. At home, different crops were grown – in particular, traditional crops such as cowpeas, groundnuts, pumpkin and maize – under very different conditions.

Most households could not afford to purchase inputs to plant other crops in their gardens. They had virtually no access to irrigation water at home and thus tended to plant more hardy and tolerant traditional crops. Most household gardens were small and grew crops for household consumption as opposed to commercial sales, and thus their needs were different at home. A portion of seed was usually saved after harvest to reduce costs of planting at the next season. New seed was only purchased when saved seed was damaged or yields became observably low. Only a few of those interviewed reported making some use of the extension provided/recommended/transferred technology at home. The ability to do this was because of the presence of a tap on their property and the fact that their husbands had alternative sources of income and gave them money to buy the inputs.

In KwaZulu-Natal the women interviewed were exclusively involved in rain-fed maize production intended for household consumption, but with surplus sales in good years. Each household had access to a 1.5 hectare field. Several years ago the extension officer had organised a project involving the demonstration of hybrid maize production. The demonstration plot was located in the village and all farmers could attend. The project was implemented by the Agricultural Research Council (ARC) and involved optimising production using hybrid maize. Over a four-year period the farmers were taken through a process of improved maize production. At the demonstration plot they were shown new techniques and could observe the changes and improvements. At the same time they implemented these practices on their own fields. The women interviewed remarked that all the farmers who had attended the training were able to use the demonstrated technologies

as they all had the resources to apply this technology.<sup>2</sup> These resources included access to adequate land, implements and money from male household members to buy fertiliser and new seed on a seasonal basis. Furthermore, seed was easily available from the agricultural cooperative 20 km away, and this variety was considered important as it was more tolerant to local climatic conditions than the traditional variety they had previously used. Female respondents farmed individually, but often formed groups with male farmers to collectively purchase seed and other inputs. The only reported constraint was that once the project ended and the ARC withdrew, there was nobody available who could solve some of the production problems they encountered afterwards. The local extension officer did not have relevant expertise and there was no funding for the ARC scientists to return.

In both instances the women are being reached by extension services. However, in KwaZulu-Natal the experience was that the spillover technology transferred was suitable to prevailing environmental and socio-economic circumstances, especially the ability to locally purchase required inputs and seed, which performed better than traditional varieties under the same conditions. In Limpopo, the women's experiences were the opposite in that the technology transferred was largely inappropriate to their socio-economic circumstances, and in fact could not be used outside the vegetable garden projects, with their supportive infrastructure. Even within the project gardens, problems were experienced, including disruptions in the irrigation system and the supply of inputs, which could not be obtained without the financial support of the extension services.

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2 Of course, those who did not have the necessary resources probably did not attend the training.

## Conclusions and recommendations

We set out to illustrate that technology provision and agricultural support in general to black women farmers requires rethinking by those conceptualising and providing such services, because in its current form and structure there does not appear to be any serious attempt to develop and provide agricultural technology that considers women's circumstances. In order to make the provision of agricultural technology more gender-sensitive, in light of the evidence presented, we make the following recommendations, which should be considered in current plans to revitalise both the public extension service and the smallholder sector more generally.

1. The profile of extension officers is at odds with the 'clients' – the evidence demonstrates clearly that black women dominate the South African agricultural sector (Figure 1), yet the majority of extension workers are male. An increase in the numbers of qualified female extension officers may result in more appropriate service delivery and assist in overcoming structural constraints, including disproportional gender representation, evident in the existing extension service. In addition, extension officers require adequate training and expertise to fulfil their function, including an understanding of the different, gendered needs of men and women farmers, so that they can respond to these with appropriate interventions tailored to the needs of different types of farmers.
2. Given that women comprise the majority of rural farmers, and equal their male counterparts in commercially-oriented small-scale agriculture, the government must ensure that its agricultural support interventions acknowledge this and reach women farmers with the relevant technologies required to

optimise their diverse reasons for farming.

3. There is a need to reconceptualise 'technology transfer and development' so that appropriate technologies and support are developed that are responsive to the differing scales of farming, to the gendered access to resources by women and men, and to the differing abilities of women to use technology. At present technology transfer and development is rather generic and does not consider social, cultural, economic and environmental diversity of farmers, and the impact of this on abilities to use technology.
4. Women experience differences in their ability to use technologies. This requires a move away from the 'spillover large-scale industrial agricultural' support that favours men, to a more responsive and context-specific, gender-oriented form of support that reaches more women and is tailored to their different circumstances and needs. Such support should enable those women who wish to scale up their agricultural activities to do so at a pace determined by them. Therefore, support should begin with enhancing existing practices, which may not be commercial in their orientation.

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