

Rethinking the use of Opinion Leaders in Different Cultures

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Introduction: The Problem Indications are that fellow farmers are the most important source of information for small-scale farmers in many parts of Africa. This suggests that it is fair to assume that the use of influential farmers or opinion leaders can significantly contribute towards an increased diffusion effect.

However, there is also evidence suggesting that the “trickle-down” of information and influence does not always occur to a significant degree (Chege et al, 1976). This has led to several studies into the nature and role of the phenomenon of opinion leadership in different cultures in Africa. The findings presented lead to a reassessment of the use of opinion leaders in promoting the diffusion of innovations.

Research Method In all studies, which were conducted in Uganda, Lesotho and South Africa, use has been made of the sociometric method of leadership identification in the context of personal interviews. The opinion leaders were identified from within the survey samples but invariably also included those nominated and falling outside the sample of interviewed respondents.

Findings and Conclusions There are clear differences between the different cultures, the biggest differences occurring between white and black cultures. One reason for the low impact of opinion leaders appears to be their incorrect identification, at least among white commercial farmers where knowledgeable individuals rather than the real influentials are nominated as the persons consulted. In all cases accessibility is critical, but the type of accessibility varies. In the black, resource-poor situation only the physical accessibility (distance) appears to be a critical factor, while psychological accessibility is most critical among the commercial white farmers. In all cultures investigated the percentage of the population qualifying as opinion leaders (using a measure of two or more nominations) is about 30 percent. This and the difficulty of correct identification suggest that other approaches like the penetration into “homophilous cells” may be more appropriate in promoting change. In the black cultures female farmers don’t feature strongly as opinion leaders and family ties or seniority are much stronger determinants of opinion leadership than the competence or farming efficiency demonstrated as a farmer. The degree of polymorphism appears to be considerably stronger in black cultures.

Discussion on Extension Implications The situation-specificity of opinion leadership and the consequent necessity to understand it and to adapt to it. Necessary adaptations in extension approaches in various cultures. New research challenges relating to the nature and determinants of opinion leadership (especially the credibility and accessibility aspects), the possible influence of minimising the effect of negative opinion leaders, etc.