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Investing in Agriculture...

Influencing policy: the role of civil society

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Civil society input on agricultural policy gateway to food security

The success stories of communal farmers benefiting from agricultural initiatives can be used as case studies to influence policy, by implementing civil society organisations in Namibia.

Laina Katangolo is a communal farmer from the Omuntele Constituency in the Oshikoto region. She muses that it's her dream as a farmer to prosper. However, owing to a range of factors such as climate change, coupled with irregular rainfall patterns it was getting more difficult every cultivation season.

She is not alone. Ms. Katangolo is one of the 65% Namibian population dependent on agriculture, which represents the key livelihood activity for the majority.

Even more challenging for Ms. Katangolo is that she relies on an Agriculture Policy that dates back to 1995. Surely, 19 years later the farming landscape has changed.

Thwarted by declining crop yields, Ms Katangolo did not hesitate adopt a new farming technique called the 'Container Cultivation Micro-drip irrigation system.'

In 2009, Ondangwa-based NGO, Creative Entrepreneurs Solutions with funding from the UNDP GEF-SGP Community-based Adaptation to Climate Change Pilot Programme introduced the 'Container Cultivation Micro-drip irrigation system;' an initiative that allows individuals to grow their own vegetables in a very efficient way in otherwise degraded soil. The project also addresses issues brought about by extreme climate events resulting from climate change.

Assistance from the civil society organisations came as a relief to Ms. Katangolo. In fact, she enthuses to be an advocate for change and thrive. She is hoping that her success story will be used as a best practice to influence policy to benefit more communal farmers in future.

"Within each society, there are early adopters and innovators who can show other farmers the benefits of changing to a system," reads the recent Food Agriculture Organisation guide for decision-makers on "Advancing Agroforestry on the Policy Agenda.

This is however only possible if civil society organisations such as the UNDP-GEF Community-Based Adaptation project in Namibia take significant steps to influence and push for more responsive agricultural policy.

Currently, although the Namibian Agriculture Policy of 1995 makes provision for investment in agriculture, marginal support is given to communal farmers as compared to support extend to large-scale investment.

About 35 percentage of the investment budget for agriculture is made in green schemes that occupy fertile ground with the availability of water in the northern communal areas, according to the Finance Minister Saara Kuugongelwa-Amadhila in her Statement for the 2012/2013 Budget. And with only about 0.5 percentage of the Gross Domestic Product going towards agriculture, communal farmers are mainly at the receiving end.

Farmers like Ms. Katangolo could improve further if civil society organisations get involved.

The entry point for change begins at Namibia's Parliament (Standing Committees). In an interview, Chief Whip of the SWAPO party in the National Assembly, Professor Peter Katjavivi says that civil society organisations can get involved in parliament activities and contribute to the various parliament standing committees if Namibia is to achieve its development targets. "Input from civil society organisations also ensures that policies are enacted properly on the ground," he said.

There are about ten parliamentary standing committees set up to consider specific issues and bills. This includes the standing committees of economic and natural resources as well as constitution and legal affairs.

The UNDP-GEF Community-Based Adaptation project in collaboration with the implementing organisation (Creative Entrepreneurs Solutions) can serve on Parliamentary Standing Committees of Parliament. But will it have any impact on policy formulation and strategies?

In its recent guide for decision-makers on "Advancing Agroforestry on the Policy Agenda," the Food Agriculture Organisation states that civil society has a role to play, and especially to organize inter-sectoral coordination for better policy coherence and synergies.

Input from civil society organisations such as Creative Entrepreneurs Solutions will help see many farmers like Ms. Katangolo prosper.

Creative Entrepreneurs Solutions directly deals with the farmers. The hands-on experience of its Chief Executive Officer, Marie Johansson serves as an added advantage that will ensure that she provides policy makers with elaborative case studies and propose motions for amendments- of what's not working and what is not.

Reasonable is the fact that, socially, any innovation needs to be accepted by the groups directly involved in the new activities. This is because different societies and cultures may require different conditions for success, according to the Food Agriculture Organisation. And application on the agricultural policy is no exception.

Ms. Katangolo, together with over 20 neighbouring farmers has started a self-help group to expand and advance their Container Cultivation Micro-drip irrigation skills. Members take up different roles, varying from treasurer position to secretarial duties.

Like the farmers take on different roles, so can civil society organisations at parliament standing committees.

In fact, parliament is set to create a network platform, whereby civil society will be invited to serve as resource persons in a number of areas of competency in order to enhance the work of parliament; where policies are tabled and passed.

“Through committee work and input from civil society, members of parliament can study issues and legislation in greater detail than is possible without it. We involve them as partners to address issues of national interest,” Katjavivi said.

Into the bargain, Minister of Agriculture, Water and Forestry, John Mutorwa in his address at the Development Dialogue Forum says the ministry welcomes initiatives such as the Development Dialogue Forum as essential platforms to provoke thoughts and to inject new ideas in his Ministry’s strategic thinking and debates on issues related to agriculture policy and food security.

Mutorwa believes that this type of dialogue would strengthen cooperation between Government and stakeholders in the search for solutions to issues of common national concern.

The greatest challenges however are bureaucracy, political influences and long-chained structures. In a news article in *The Namibian* newspaper dated 31.01.2013, Mutorwa urged the ministry’s heads to cut bureaucratic processes to speed up the implementation of the ministry’s programmes and agricultural policies.

To be effective, civil society organisations need two forms of integration: with the people and policy regulators. To be fully implemented, the integration must have suitable technical, economic and social conditions, recommends the Food Agriculture Organisation report.

This way, civil society organisations will also then serve as the as the implementers of policies. “No policy can work when decisions are not properly applied. As with other strategies –because of its special need for sustainability and permanence – a proper implementation of decisions and regulations is required,” states the FAO report.

With agricultural policies and farming classified as the cornerstone to food self-sufficiency in Namibia, through adopters like Ms Katangolo, the UNDP-GEF Community-Based Adaptation project/ Creative Entrepreneurs Solutions is a traditional way to advocate for change, amend, influence and implement of strategically for agricultural prosperity.

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Laina Katangolo, interview

Peter Katjavivi, interview