

# The smallholder dairyman's role in Africa

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*Smallholder dairy farmers have been operating in many countries for many decades with varying degrees of success. This farming practice undoubtedly has an important role to play in shaping the future of the African dairy industry.*

Smallholder farmers have the opportunity of entering the mainstream economy – if their organisational structure is part of a broad-based unified dairy industry.

Dairying is dynamic, complicated, very technical, management intensive and long-term. These characteristics require dairy farmers to be committed

to their animals and enterprise. In addition, fluctuating viability levels, common in most dairy industries, require that farmers have resilience and stamina to withstand the “lean” times.

Dairy farmers often venture into cash crops to supplement income from milk sales and this dilutes the management of the dairy unit. This

situation is applicable to all dairy farmers, but more so to smallholder producers, who in general, operate within narrow profit margins.

### Smallholder farmers

The term “smallholder” or “small-scale” dairy farmer means different things to different people. To the majority, these terms describe a farmer with two or three cows. However, some of these farmers may milk many cows. To others, the picture is of a farmer from a distant rural area, while in reality some of these farmers are found close to urban areas. In general, this category is considered poor, lagging in modern farming methods and technology.

Ignoring for a moment the volume of milk produced in relation to home usage, it is important to define and divide this diverse group into two categories, namely:

- ▶ **Smallholder subsistence farmers** produce sufficient milk for home consumption during favourable times of the year. Production is low and erratic
- ▶ **Smallholder commercial farmers** produce more milk than their own requirements and sell excess, either directly to consumers or supply milk centres or co-operatives who generally process and market milk and milk products. Production is, however, often erratic and subject to seasonal changes and viability.

These definitions are considered important to assist in identifying members of a category, so that financial and technical interventions may be used to best advantage. In addition, it is important that subsistence farmers will progress to commercial status and even further to becoming medium- or large-scale commercial producers.

Within the smallholder sector, farmers will fluctuate between subsistence and commercial, depending on numerous factors. The main factors are cow numbers, prevailing climatic conditions, viability of milk production and individual farmer needs and motivation.

### The smallholder's role

Published case studies and reports on the smallholder sector in different African countries concur that, in general, this sector is overlooked. Policy makers and industry stakeholders often underestimate its importance, resulting in inadequate funding and

support. However, this sector has the potential to fulfil a meaningful role in:

- ▶ Poverty alleviation in rural areas
- ▶ Generating a regular income
- ▶ Food security in rural areas
- ▶ Improving the living standards of rural people
- ▶ Improving the health status of rural communities
- ▶ Sustaining families during periods of drought
- ▶ Elevating women in rural communities
- ▶ Capacity building of individuals
- ▶ Improving the efficiency of sustainable land utilisation
- ▶ Introducing the rural farmer into the mainstream economy
- ▶ Developing the market base for milk and milk products
- ▶ As milk production is encouraged, so infrastructure has to be developed and skills training provided.

Many of these positive attributes are very difficult to monitor and quantify. Progress is therefore difficult to evaluate in relation to resources provided. In countries with a formal commercial dairy industry, presumably with well-organised and functioning farmer representative structures, the smallholder sector must be represented.

This inclusion in a broad-based industry enhances unification and normally strengthens the industry's voice. An example of this concept exists in Zimbabwe. The industry there has formed the Zimbabwe Dairy Industry Trust with representation from all stakeholders, namely commercial large scale and smallholder producers, processors, and government departments.

The Trust has no statutory power, but plays a vital role in providing a range of technical and management services to producers and processors. It also serves as a vital forum for stakeholders to deliberate on national issues that challenge the industry as a whole. Although the total volume of milk the smallholder sector produces and sells may be relatively small, the sector plays a pivotal role in the communities where smallholder farmers operate.

### The way forward

Stakeholders and support agencies must recognise the significant role smallholder dairy farmers can play within a well-structured, organised and efficiently operating dairy industry.

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Smallholder dairy farmers require unique support that should include government departments, industry stakeholders and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

It is important for the support group to have a forum where strategies can be discussed, appropriate action plans can be drawn up, specific tasks delegated for implementation, and progress can be monitored and reviewed. Without this harmonisation, smallholder farmers become confused and demotivated. For example, one NGO may propose an action plan that may well be contrary to another or a duplication of it.

Any organisation that intends in assisting smallholder farmers must appreciate from the outset that their programme must be long term and their input must be ongoing and repetitive. Technology transfer must be appropriate and most importantly, at the correct level for the respective farmer group. The ultimate objective should be to build a system that is financially and environmentally self-sustaining.

### Support groups

Support groups should discourage members to rely on political patronage. In fact, their self-esteem and confidence needs to be strengthened through education and skills training. One should also foster the acceptance of responsibility and accountability for their own affairs – both at family and community level. Extension workers and support groups should build the capacity of rural communities to manage change and assess the value of new technologies in their changing circumstances.

Extension activities must be well-planned and take into account cultural differences. Experience in Zimbabwe indicates that discussion groups held with farmers have limited success. However, it has been found that interacting small farmer groups from one area with those in another creates a strong competitive attitude in both groups. In addition, new ideas and information is more readily accepted between groups than within groups.

In the event that a smallholder group ventures into processing, the product range should be aligned to the market requirement within the area rather than competing with large commercial processors who service urban areas. Transport to distant centres adds costs, as does maintaining the appropriate cold chain.

(References available from author.) DMA

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