Hard Talk On Saturday

‘Knowledge exchange key to solving global prolems’

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What is the nature of the partnership between NMBU and Luana?

The collaboration is centered on student exchange and research within the CAMBACC Programme. Student exchange is facilitated through our School of Business and Economics, whereas CAMBACC encompasses seven different projects at the Norwegian University of Life Sciences. I am involved in a project on livestock value chain, food security and environmental quality that is headed by Professor Leonard Katwamanga, Director of the Programmes in Agricultural Promotion Programme (TaPP), in Malawi.

How important are partnerships between institutions of higher learning?

The current climatic challenges must be addressed through cross-cutting research approaches, which is the primary objective of higher educational institutions. In order to solve the global challenges of food security and climate change, we need to build partnerships for the transfer of knowledge and skills. This way, enabling technologies in one part of the world may be made available for a larger scientific community to combat food shortage and climate change worldwide.

I understand some students from Norway came to Malawi to have hands-on experience with a livestock husbandry. What purpose do these visits serve?

Considering that the two countries have different types of climate, it is important to learn from each other. When it comes to climate change, Norway also experiences unseasonal weather. The worried is getting wetter and the summers colder. So, there is no doubt that we have a common problem. An important aspect of bringing Norwegian students to Malawi is to present to them the opportunity of working outside Norway. These are very capable young people who would make a difference wherever they may go. So, why not try to influence the direction they may take? When it comes to specific contributions by the students, they must be seen in the context of our profession. We are working on the optimization of health and production in cows, and the underlying mechanisms are quite similar both in Norway and Malawi. Besides the objectives of the project related to improving milk yield, calving growth, reproductive function and milk composition, the students have participated in obtaining blood samples to determine the disease situation in the population. There is a need to build a robust population of Zebu to solve the challenge of prolonged periods of drought, and healthy animals are a prerequisite to robustness. Director Gibson Ndanga at the Central Veterinary Lab in Lilongwe has been kind enough to take on the task to train the students in certain diagnostic techniques that they seldom encounter in Norway, so knowledge exchange goes both ways.

Are there plans for Norwegian students to visit NMBU in Norway to appreciate similar challenges brought by climate change?

Currently, the School of Business and Economics at our university is actively promoting student exchange programmes. There are also Master and PhD students from Malawi that are currently enrolled in Norway. So, I would say that there is an active participation also from the Malawian side in Norway, although more exchange programmes would be welcomed.

How will farmers, themselves, benefit from the initiative?

The general idea of our current activities is to empower farmers with knowledge so that the dry period may not greatly affect Zebu cattle. After all, a significant quantity of meat and milk in Malawi comes from Zebu cattle. We use community-based resources such as leguminous trees and maize bran for feeding of Zebu cows during the months of October and November. Additional feeding will help in the maintenance of the body condition, thus increasing milk production during prolonged dry periods. Currently, the farmers do not have leguminous trees, but seedlings are being distributed by our project. We have purchased dried leaves from leguminous trees and we are training the farmers to use them as a feed additive. The cows love the raw feed that we bring in by trunks, and the farmers become motivated when planting their own trees. So I would claim that we are already seeing mitigation of our activities. We also study the effect of distance to water sources, milk yield, calving growth, reproductive function, milk composition and more. This way we will be able to give the farmers science-based advice on the best approaches to the keeping of Zebu cattle, and we add to the body of knowledge within the scientific community. We can also offer policy makers knowledge on the production and health limits of these animals, so that water dams may be restored.

What is your impression, so far?

I must say that I am very pleased with the way my co-workers in Malawi have planned and accommodated this project. It has been easy for me to be a part of their team. Also, the reception I have received at Luana in general and at the Animal Science Department in particular has been very positive. The same applies to the Central Veterinary Laboratory in Lilongwe. Last but not the least, we have been very well received by the farmers in Rumpi, which probably relies on the fact that they are nice people, but it probably also helps that the agricultural extension officers and the local Tapp representative have facilitated our visits in a nice manner.