

Ms Lucy Mwangi, ATPS Communications Officer, interviews a leading international scholar, **Prof Bob Orskov**, from Orskov Foundation and Professor of Aberdeen University and Member, Macaulay Land Use Research Institute, Aberdeen UK, at the occasion of the ATPS Phase VI Strategic Plan, 2008 - 2011 Implementation Planning Workshop, 18 - 19 July 2008, Nairobi Kenya



Ms Mwangi: When was the Orskov Foundation started and where did your interest in indigenous knowledge begin?

Prof. Ørskov: My interest in indigenous knowledge began about 25 years ago when multinationals particularly the United Nations (UN), International Atomic Energy

Agency (IAEA) and Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) asked me to be their consultant to help them identify and solve problems in different parts of the world. So I had the opportunity to go round the world. You will not believe it but I have been to about 80 different countries around the world working on innovations for rural development with various farming communities.

I have had fantastic opportunities and experience because I have visited these countries many times and in this way I have been very privileged particularly considering my background as both a scientist and a small farmer. My background as a small farmer makes it very easy to speak and understand small farmers as I meet them on equal footing. I can identify with their problems because there is no barrier. I do not go to them as a famous professor which will intimidate them but as a small farmer from Scotland and when they hear this, they relax and know that we are together.

My background has helped me to appreciate and understand what is important and what are the bottlenecks or constraints to development in the rural sectors of many countries. In this way I can say that I have been very lucky in my career.

Ms Mwangi: As an African I find it very hard to accept that there are small farmers in Europe.

Prof. Ørskov: There are small farmers in Europe. It is true that what is termed as a small farmer in Europe may not be the same in other parts of the developing world. For instance in Scotland I have about 60 acres of land which would be considered a big farm in Africa, but for us, this is a small farm. My father's farm in Denmark was about 40-50 acres but it was considered a small farm it depends on where you come from; in Indonesia of course a small farm is less than an acre.

Ms Mwangi: What were your general thoughts about the ATPS Phase VI Strategic Plan, 2008 - 2011 implementation planning workshop held on 19 July 2008, in which you participated as a Resource Person?

Prof. Ørskov: It was fantastic! I enjoyed it very much. I hope that what I had to contribute was useful. It was reassuring to know that there is a Network in Africa working on science, technology and innovations for development from such a multi-disciplinary approach and with strong links with policy makers and practitioners in the continent. The diversity of the representation of African countries and the levels of experience in this area was very good. There were also some new points that came up that I did not necessarily think of before. Generally I learnt a lot. Hopefully, I will be able to contribute to it (the implementation of the ATPS Phase VI Strategic Plan) as well.

We talked a lot about how resources are managed in different climates and different social economic circumstances. This is a key factor that must be considered in the development discourse because there is no single solution. Countries are different and so are the contexts of their development trajectories. We also tried to emphasize that we must not be "specialistic" but must strive to be holistic in our views because our client, for example, the small farmer, is holistic. If we are too "specialistic" then we will not be able to identify what the problems are because they may not be in our specialty as Professors and scientists in specialized disciplines. We may not be able to look at the whole picture. This is why I cherish very much the multi-disciplinary approach of the ATPS and its emphasis on the linkage between science, policy

and practice. It was very unique to find scientists from varied disciplines, government ministers and governors, and practitioners engage in prioritizing research programs from the onset. This makes our research and development interventions relevant and effective. This is what I have been preaching for many years throughout the countries I have worked in. This philosophy of the ATPS Phase VI plan is excellent. It will work.

We also discussed that this causes our clients (e.g. farmers), remember that we are not their masters but their servants. We have to hold this philosophy because it is important in the whole aspect of research particularly in developing countries. It does not have to be that we scientists only have to research for publications. There should be promotions based on impact on rural development and its impact on poverty alleviation. These are the sorts of things we discussed which interest me the most.

Ms Mwangi: I'd like to take you back to the Orskov Foundation...

Prof. Ørskov: Oh, yes. The Foundation was set up by the Macaulay Institute around my 70th birthday when they thought it a good gesture to set up something that had my name on it and together we discussed what we can do with it.

Our feelings were that there were two things that we could do:

- First we could provide support for students who were registered in their own countries and who needed about two or three months doing what they really wanted to do in their post graduate studies. The training could be done anywhere in the world and not necessarily in the UK. It was important because we do not want to fund anyone to come and be registered in the UK which is very expensive so we prefer the students to register in their own countries.
- The second thing we have funded have been community projects, we have something similar here in Kenya with the Egerton University on rearing goats. In Indonesia we have about eight projects. We also have projects in Vietnam and Uganda. These projects empower communities. We go into the community and find out what is the best way to help poor communities and then discuss with them what works best for them, and work with them to achieve this.

One thing I have learnt in the process is that free gifts never work. Gifts or development grants have to come with commitments where by whatever one gets has to be paid back to the community in some form or other. For instance with the goat project in Indonesia, the system is that of sharing the off springs from the first two pregnancies of the goat with the community. This means that half of the offspring go back to the community so that they can decide what to do with this. They can either decide to start another project or increase the members in their own system. If we have about 72 goats and they give birth to three during the first two pregnancies then the sharing is one and half. This system is not only used for goats but also bees in Uganda or whatever the project. The clients have to be very involved because when they participate it also makes them more committed. This is quite a success story.

Ms. Mwangi: The Orskov Foundation which was set up at Macaulay provides a good basis on which agricultural innovation can contribute towards rural poverty alleviation. What lessons can the ATPS Network learn from the Foundation?

Prof. Ørskov: I hope the philosophy of who is our client? Our client is not the big farmers. Our client though different in each country is the small farmers. I am most concerned about the small farmer where the poverty is most felt.

Essentially the philosophy must be central and there are of course the different experiences which we can then share and discuss to help everyone. I suppose I have the advantage of having been around for a few years and seeing a bit more. What I saw yesterday in Egerton is fantastic in terms of the overall project impact.

Prof. Ørskov: The Orskov Foundation has been promoting indigenous knowledge (IK) what can ATPS and Africa learn?

I think that if I can bring items to discuss based on my experiences then they might be of help, particularly my experiences with small farmers. If you want more farmers to participate and produce more then it has to be relatively free from risk. Small farmers cannot afford to take big economic risks like

the big farmers so you will have to operate in a totally different way.

I am also learning and I never cease to learn as far as rural development is concerned, you never become an expert. You may be an expert in technology or in metabolism like I was but I would never call myself an expert in rural development. I hope to contribute to the discussions and have people discussing these issues and maybe come forward with something that can be useful. Generally I hope that my experience can be my contribution to bring new points. I do not have the answers.

For instance there is a big problem in agriculture with oil/fuel, fertilizer and other prices going up and this has huge implications so we need to really come out and bring our research to solve these problems because they are likely to stay. We need to discuss the implications on research all over the world/globally.

Ms. Mwangi: What is your general first impression regarding the relevance of the ATPS Network to African development, having interacted with the ATPS in the past week?

Prof. Ørskov: Very relevant. From what I have experienced and further discussions with Dr. Kevin Urama, (Executive Director, ATPS) so far, I believe that the Network has a huge mandate and promise in bringing Africans from all over the continent to discuss and find policy solutions for their many problems which are uniquely African. This is very important. There is a need to ensure that these are not mixed up with European problems and Western solutions. It also means that some of the solutions which could be very relevant to the problems in other African countries are effectively shared and discussed. So in a way, ATPS provides an economical means of addressing ST&I policy issues in Africa as well. There could be something in Lesotho that could be very useful to Kenya. The platform provided by the ATPS makes knowledge sharing easy and cost-effective.

I feel that ATPS has an African view which if properly set up can actually reduce the amount of funding that is needed to address Africa's problems. ATPS can be very useful to African development and I am very happy to be a little bit part of ATPS. I

have just completed my application form for the ATPS fellowship program and hope that I can be able to contribute meaningfully to the Network activities in future.

Ms. Mwangi: ATPS places much emphasis on bridging the gap between science, policy and practice. In your experience how can the ATPS bridge these gaps?

Prof. Ørskov: We need to make Policy Makers feel and understand that what ATPS is doing is important, that it can help them to tackle the right policy questions. It is politically sound for them (Politicians) to set out the right policies that will impact positively on the public and hence win them votes. This is where I say that there is a difference between countries. I was speaking to the S&T ministry officials in Kenya and they were positively engaging and very enthusiastic. Each country has its own problems and the approach to bridging the gap may be different. Kenya is, for instance, reasonably well off in terms of policy makers listening to scientists and wanting to develop good policies that will make impact. Generally, we have to make them understand our arguments not in scientific terms but what the problem is and what they can gain politically.

I have been trying to stress about risk minimization in small holder agriculture for many years. If you want farmers to produce a certain crop then you may have to insist that World Trade Organization (WTO) respects Kenya's agenda as a nation. Then encourage the farmers by telling them that you will guarantee their crop prices and make fertilizers available. So that instead of reducing output, they can actually get back their grain and thereby make it relatively risk free.

Ms. Mwangi: Where do you see opportunities for collaboration between the ATPS Network and the Orskov Foundation?

Prof. Ørskov: It is easy because we can collaborate through various projects. Yesterday, I met someone who wants to set up a project in Kisumu. By having joint projects, ATPS could help show results (research) to help rural people see the importance of the Network. There could be collaborative opportunities and I hope that the Foundation and I could help and share my experiences. I also hope that in the future we could think about

doing something jointly as ATPS-Ørskov Foundation projects. ATPS can get credit through increased visibility so that the network can also benefit.

Ms. Mwangi: You have just completed the ATPS Fellowship Application Form. What vision would you bring to ATPS?

Prof. Ørskov: I hope a global vision, through my experiences from other parts of the world. I feel that Africa can learn from Asia and vice versa, much more that they can learn from Europe. If you are coming from Asian point of view, it is likely that you will probably see Africa as a waste land. If you have a small number of Asians on a few acres of land, they would probably be growing a lot more than African farmers would. Maybe it is because they have had problems for a quite a long while and hence have evolved ways of addressing these challenges. I still have more to learn, and as I said earlier, I have learned a lot from the ATPS Network in the past week. However, a vision from 80 countries of the world is I hope useful.

I wish to thank the ATPS Network for inviting me to its Phase VI strategic Plan implementation meeting. The experience has been very enriching and encouraging. ATPS has got a good model and a good philosophy and I feel that it can make a great difference in African development. I hope to be able to contribute to the work of the ATPS in future, in any capacity that you feel that I can. I am ready to help and to learn form the Network.