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TOWARDS REDESIGNING THE AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION SERVICE IN SOUTH AFRICA: VIEWS AND PROPOSALS OF EXTENSIONISTS IN THE EASTERN CAPE.

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ABSTRACT

The Eastern Cape's Department of Agriculture's extension service is in vital need of revitalization. The extension recovery plan has started this process, but international developments in agricultural extension suggest that the present extension model is outdated. The purpose of this paper is to firstly, acquire a SWOT-analysis from the extensionists on what they perceive to be the services strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

Secondly, to enquire of the extensionists what they perceive to be the problems that the service is facing as well as their perceived roles, the desired outcomes of the extension service and activities to attain these outcomes. This is achieved through using an Objective-Orientated Intervention Planning process, which is an adapted form of Logical Framework Analysis.

The main results from this study were what the extensionists perceived to be the activities required to reach the desired outcomes of effective extension. This paper is highly relevant as it follows a bottom-up approach in acquiring what extensionists believe to be the way forward and this paper will contribute to a forthcoming paper that will propose a redesigned extension service.

1. INTRODUCTION

The South African agricultural extension service is challenged to improve food security, develop the rural areas through agricultural activity and to create sustainable jobs in farming. This is essentially promoted through the transfer of information and technologies to farmers in order to increase sustainable agriculture. According to Mudau, Geyser, Nesamvuni & Belemu (2009), recent policy formulation has introduced the Extension Recovery Plan (ERP), which aims to energise the extension service and bring it new hope. In the past, the extension workers felt

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dejected as they were uncertain about their future and the future of extension. The ERP was informed by the need to overhaul the extension service and it is based on five pillars, namely:

1. Ensure accountability and visibility of extension;
2. Promote professionalism and improve the extension image;
3. Re-skilling and orientation of extensionists;
4. Provision of Information & Communication Technology (ICT) infrastructure and other resources; and
5. Recruitment of personnel over the Medium-Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF).

According to Swanson & Rajalahti (2010), there are three major agricultural development goals at the national level, which determine the activities of the extension system. The development goals are to (1) achieve national food security, (2) improve rural livelihoods and (3) improve natural resource management. The activities required by the extension service to reach these goals overlap. To achieve short-term food security, the extension service needs to transfer technologies that will increase staple food crop production. To improve rural livelihoods, the extension service must help farmers increase their farm income by increasing the production of high-value products, diversifying their farming systems and organizing farmers into producer groups to increase their market access. Lastly, to improve natural resource management, the extension service must train farmers in sustainable natural resource management practices. This should help achieve long-term national food security.

In this context and according to Van den Ban & Hawkins (1996), the definition of agricultural extension is that "extension involves the conscious use of communication of information to help people form sound opinions and make good decisions". An updated definition was proposed by Leeuwis (2004), which takes into account the various new developments in the field of agricultural extension. This definition states that extension is "a series of embedded communicative interventions that are meant, among others, to develop and/or induce innovations which supposedly help to resolve (usually multi-actor) problematic situations."

A holistic approach will be taken in this study involving recent policy statements (Bese, 2010) and discussions with the leadership of extension in the Eastern Cape's Department of Agriculture (ECDoA), and also by taking note of views and perceptions of other important stakeholders and role players. A first paper on the topic accounts for the views of relevant scientific role players and was published in the South African Journal of Agricultural Extension in 2009 (van Niekerk, Stroebel, van Rooyen, Whitfield & Swanepoel, 2009). A second paper focused on the perspectives of smallholder farmers and is presently under review for the aforementioned journal. This paper contributes a third dimension and reports on the views and perceptions of a representative group of extensionists residing in the seven regions of the Eastern Cape. Two more papers will follow this paper, concerning perceptions of professional services, i.e. farm management services and agribusinesses serving smallholder farmers in the province. A final paper will provide an overall synthesis and proposals towards redesigning the agricultural extension system.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this study a representative selection of fourteen practicing extensionists, from the seven regions of the Eastern Cape, were selected by the province's Department of Agriculture who were required to describe the current extension system in the Eastern Cape and what they perceive as their role in agricultural extension.

The first input was made by way of a SWOT analysis in the Eastern Cape's Department of Agriculture. The second aspect concerned the role the extensionists should/could play through an Objective-Orientated Intervention Planning (OOIP) procedure, which is an adapted form of a Logical Framework Analysis (LFA). The OOIP-enquiry is founded on constructivism whereby the process facilitator assists multiple participants in reconstructing a problem into a solution around a logical consensus (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). The aim of the OOIP-enquiry is to analyse, plan, implement and evaluate possible intervention in order to improve efficiency and effectiveness (van Rooyen, Swart, D'Haese, Wessels & Carstens, 2002).

The OOIP is based on intervention logic of goals and the required objectives, results and sets of activities, and is conducted in a formal planning process (van Rooyen, Anandajayasekeram, Rukuni, Marassas, D'Haese & D'Haese, 2006). According to van Rooyen, D'Haese & Anandajayasekeram (2002), this tool is essentially used to clarify cause-effect relationships as well as clarifying logical links "between inputs and objectives; activities and outputs; broader purposes and the ultimate goals" that the tool was meant to serve. This tool is therefore a systematic planning process that is based on logical deductions (van Rooyen, *et al*, 2006).

This process revealed the perceptions of the extensionists regarding their core objective or mission as well as the outcomes they envisaged to be accomplished when the core objectives were met. The activities or programmes that needed to be performed for the core objectives and subsequent envisaged outcomes were also identified by the extensionists.

3. RESULTS: SWOT ANALYSIS

3.1 Strengths

The extensionists identified the following as their strengths:

a) Farmer development through group sessions and demonstration trials. Transferring information to farmers through regular interactions as above and instilling new ideas to farmers and thus improving their farming skills;

b) Participative action through working with people on the ground and involving them in the development process;

c) Service delivery through the regulation and management of government support programmes;

d) Well structured service with suitably qualified officials (both extension and senior officials); and

e) Providing support to policy formulation.

3.2 Weaknesses

The following weaknesses were identified by the extensionists:

a) Ineffective management with poor implementation of policy formulation as well as a top-down approach;

b) Being a "jack of all trades and master of none" as there is no specialization;

c) Scarce resources, including finances, for farmer development; and

d) Poor communication with farmers and within the service.

3.3 Opportunities

Several opportunities were identified, these are:

a) Improvement of knowledge through training provided, thus assisting people to move from point A to point B in their development;

b) Increase in production and hence, increases in food security;

c) Easy access to other agriculturally-related industries; and

d) Good communication skills with farmers.

3.4 Threats

Threats that were identified included:

a) Lack of technology and information for workers, such as the prevailing weather conditions;

b) The development of unproductive farmers who cannot be commercial farmers;

c) Competition between other departments and Non-Government Organizations (NGO's) in the same areas;

d) Political will to effect change as well as interference of politicians into technical aspects; and

e) Too many bosses, thus making it impossible to work according to your programme.

3.5 Analysis

From the above, one can conclude the following about the state of affairs in the Eastern Cape's extension service. Firstly, the extension service has strengths in farmer development, participative action, implementing government support programmes and suitably qualified personnel who can support policy formulation. Secondly, the extension service also has inherent weaknesses, such as the lack of effective management, a top-down approach within the service, the lack of specialisation, scarce resources for developmental efforts as well as poor communication within the service and with farmers. Thirdly, the extension service offers several opportunities for improvement. These include assistance in development through the transfer of knowledge and training so that production should increase. The service also has access to agri-industries and therefore potentially good chances of effective communication. Lastly, the service identified threats that included lack of information and technologies for extensionists, development of unproductive farmers, competition between other public departments and NGO's, political interference and too many bosses.

According to the Christoplos (2010), the Food & Agricultural Organization (FAO) has recognised the need to mobilise the extension service to achieve a range of rural development goals. These goals can be achieved when weaknesses are turned into strengths, opportunities are fully utilized and threats are neutralised. Such goals include:

- The enhancement of people's access to technologies and related information;
- Ensuring that farmers and actors in value chains can cope with changing markets;
- The enablement of farmers to understand climate change and to be in a position to mitigate and adapt to the new challenges;
- The support of rural communities in effectively managing their natural resources; and
- The assistance to farmers to use their available resources optimally.

4. RESULTS: OBJECTIVE-ORIENTATED INTERVENTION PLANNING

This approach allows participating role players to state clearly the problems (see Figure 1: Problem Tree) as experienced by them and thereafter propose "solutions" as envisaged outcomes, core objectives, programmes and sets of activities (Figure 2:Objective Tree).

4.1 Problem Statement Defined by the Extensionists

The extensionists involved in this research identified the following as their core problems resulting in them being unable to transfer effectively information and technologies through communication, which in turn immobilises farmers to become commercially viable.

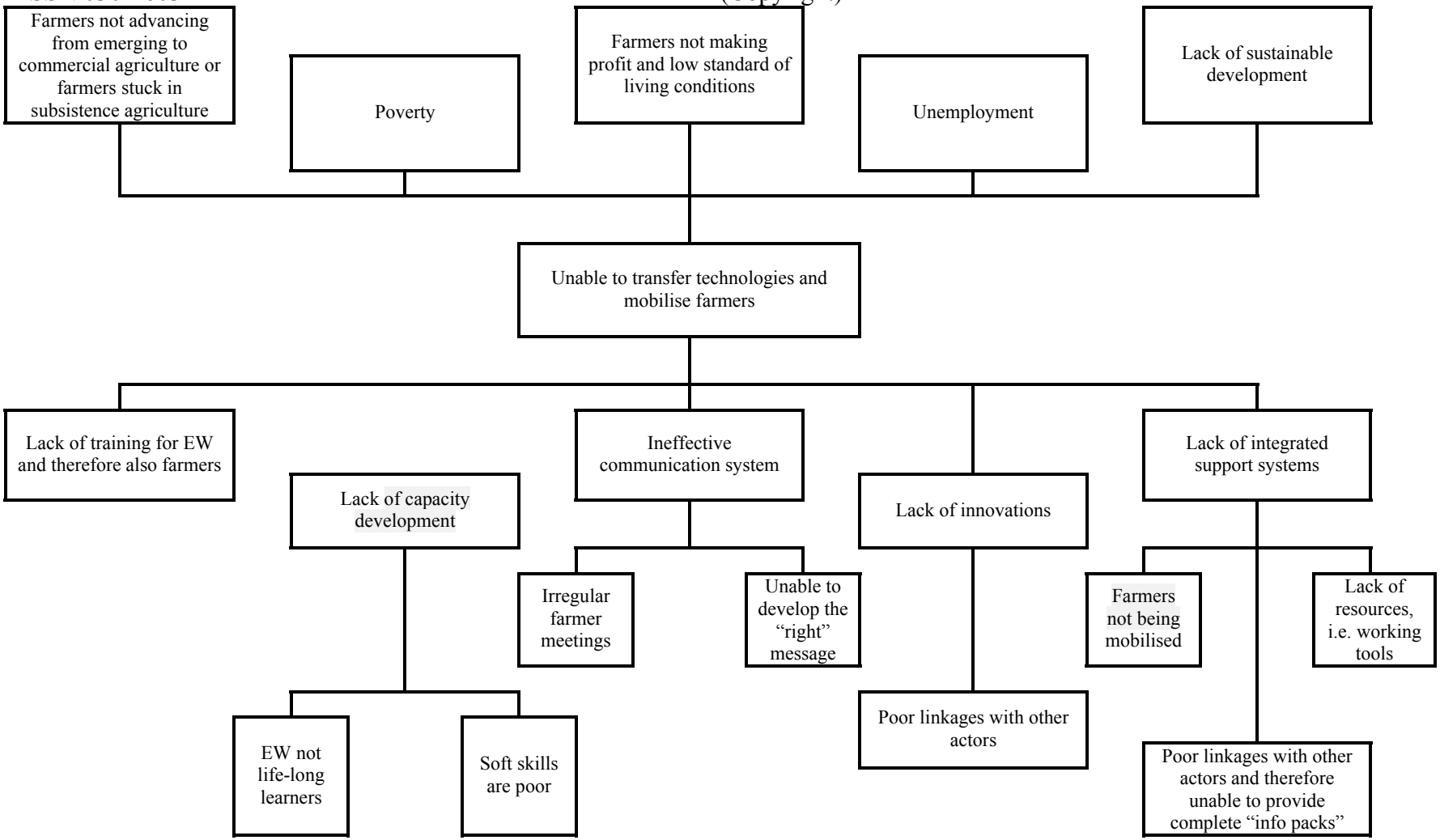

Figure 1: Problem Tree

4.2 Core Objectives of Agricultural Extension

Their core objectives or mission as identified by the extensionists revolved around three key concepts namely "to transfer, to communicate and to mobilise". This was interpreted as "the imparting of agricultural knowledge to farmers, for them to be able to optimise their production in a sustainable way and to enable them to achieve food security initially and thereafter to develop towards commercial production. This statement was refined to the training and development of farmers' skills in agriculture so that they can produce quality food and to alleviate poverty. The core objectives, envisaged outcomes and, programmes and activities are displayed in Figure 2: Objective Tree.

4.3 The Envisaged outcomes of the Extensionists' efforts

The extensionists envisaged five outcomes that would be achieved once the core objectives were met. These outcomes are:

a) To alleviate poverty in their society through food production. According to Rivera, Qamar & Van Crowder (2001), farmers need to be convinced that the extension service is communicating valuable information towards income generation and improving their living standards. The extension service must therefore supply appropriate technologies in this regard.

b) To develop farmers so that they can make a profit out of farming so that they can improve their standard of living. According to Pesche & Francois (2007), the extension service can help by improving farming and farm yields so that farmers can become empowered and support their livelihoods.

c) To develop emerging farmers to be commercial farmers and to shift farmers from subsistence to commercial farming. According to Swanson (2008), due to economic growth in developing countries, there are opportunities for smallholder farmers to increase incomes by diversifying into high-value farm products, but this would require these farmers to learn new production and management techniques (human capital development).

d) Sustainable farmer development focussing on poverty alleviation and job creation by means of implementing the five pillars of sustainability. According to Smyth & Dumanski (1993, quoted by Dumanski, 1997), the five pillars of sustainability revolve around social equity, economic viability, maintenance of productivity levels, protection of the environment and reduction of production risks.

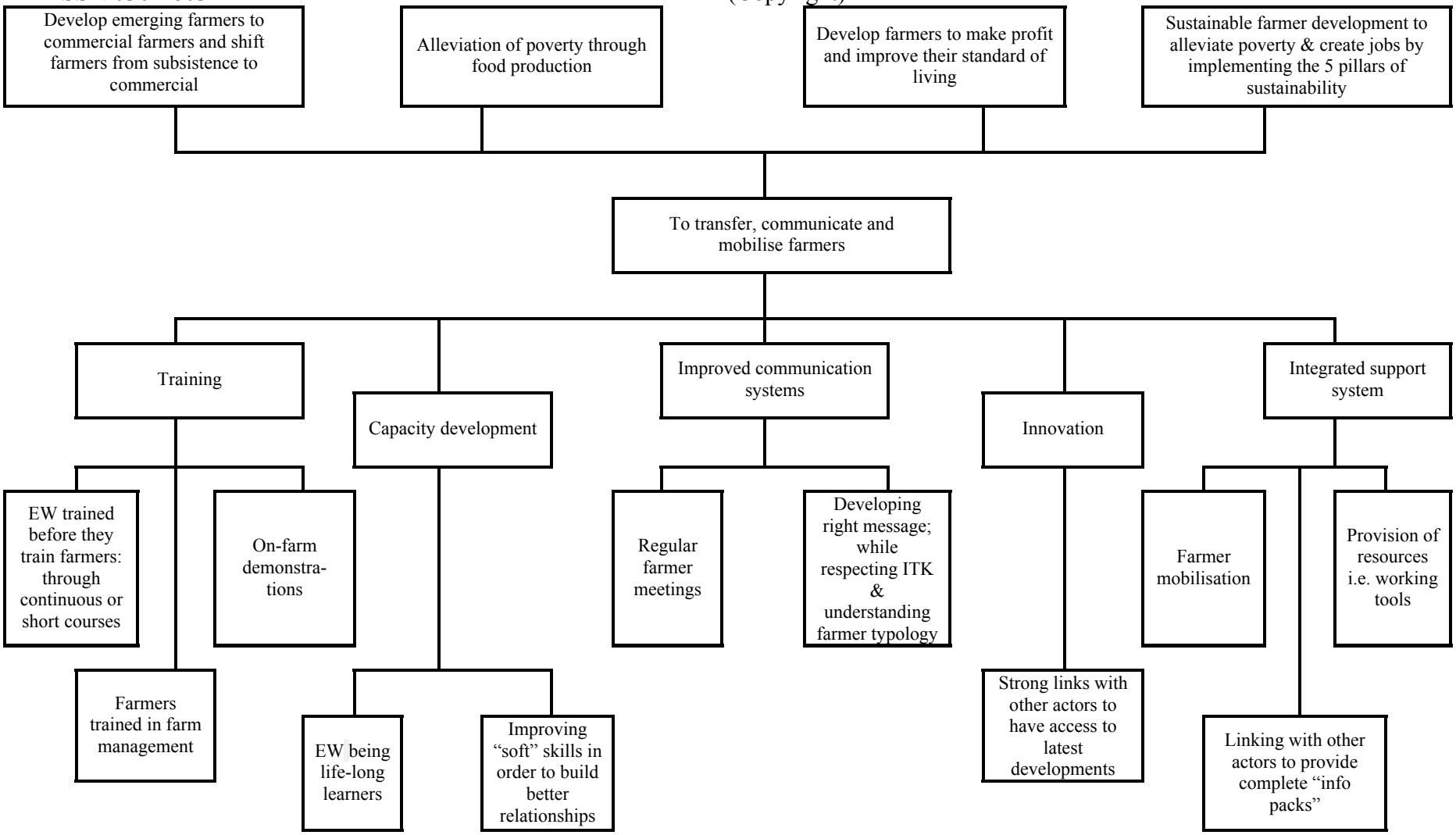

Figure 2: Objective Tree

4.4 Programmes and activities

The extensionists identified five core activities that needed to be fulfilled in order to reach the objectives and desired outcomes. The five activities had sub-activities that needed to be accomplished before a specific activity's goals could be achieved. These activities (and their sub-activities) are:

a) Training:

- Extensionists need to be trained before they train the farmers. This could be achieved through continuous or short-course training.
- The farmers needed training in farm management, which included book keeping, decision making, marketing, financial skills, time management and risk management.
- On-farm demonstrations should be used as a training tool.

b) Integrated support systems:

- Farmer mobilization, namely "farmers must be ready to adopt new ideas introduced to them" and extension workers should link up with farmer associations.
- The extensionists must link up with agribusinesses and subject-matter specialists so that the extensionists can provide complete "information packs".
- The provision of resources, which consisted of access to working tools and the implementation of farmer contact sessions.

c) Innovation:

- This activity could be accomplished if the extensionists had strong linkages with agribusinesses, top commercial farmers and research stations. In this way, extensionists would be in a position to access the latest developments in agricultural innovations and technologies.

d) Improved communication systems:

- Regular farmer meetings.
- Developing the "right" message, respecting local indigenous knowledge and understanding the relevant farming systems (typology analysis).

e) Capacity development:

- Extensionists themselves being "life-long learners".
- Improving extensionists soft skills, in other words, being able to build good social relationships.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

From this analysis extensionists determined that their core objective is "to transfer, communicate and mobilise farmers" although they could not achieve this objective at present. They suggested that five core activities were needed to improve the extension service. These activities were training, integrated support systems, innovation, improved communication systems and capacity development; with each of these activities having sub-activities.

Once these activities have been holistically achieved, their envisaged outcomes were the alleviation of poverty, the profitability of farming, farmers develop from subsistence and emerging status to commercial farmers and agriculture becoming more sustainable.

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