Volunteer farmer trainers: improving smallholder farmers’ access to information for a stronger dairy sector

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Volunteer farmer trainer programmes are able to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of farmer advisory services.

Linking volunteer farmer trainers with government extension services and other service providers ensures that they receive technical support and are up to date on current developments and innovations.

Facilitating volunteer farmer trainers to organize themselves into associations helps raise their profile among policy makers and the development community.

Policy recommendations

Background

Over the past decade agricultural extension has evolved from a linear model of technology transfer to a more demand-driven service involving many actors. Nonetheless, extension-service delivery in many developing countries continues to face many challenges. These include low budgetary allocation, understaffing, and low staff morale due to poor remuneration. Passiveness of communities and a tendency of extension services to treat all farmers identically regardless of their particular contexts and needs, further limits the performance of extension programmes.
Donors and policy makers would like to see agricultural extension systems that are more participatory, demand-driven, client-oriented and farmer-led, and that pay special attention to women and the poor. Such new approaches would focus on farmers as the principal agents of change in their communities, with extension workers serving as facilitators who train farmers on entrepreneurship and link them to markets and credit institutions.

However, for these new extension approaches to be institutionalized, they must demonstrate their superiority over old approaches. They must be accountable to their clients, more effective in disseminating new technologies, and sustainable.

One such approach is the “volunteer farmer trainers” approach that is being used in the East Africa Dairy Development (EADD) project to disseminate information and knowledge on feed technologies to dairy farmers in Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda.

**The East Africa Dairy Development project**

The East Africa Dairy Development (EADD) project is a collaboration of Heifer International, Technoserve, the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI), African Breeders Services (ABS) and the World Agroforestry Centre (ICRAF).

Started in 2008, the initiative aims to double the incomes of 179,000 dairy farmers in Kenya, Uganda and Rwanda through improved dairy production and marketing. The project has been using the volunteer farmer trainers approach to disseminate dairy technologies, with great success.

The volunteer farmer trainers train fellow farmers on livestock feed crops (grasses, legumes and fodder shrubs), feed conservation methods (e.g. silage and hay baling) and feed formulation.

By June 2012, there were 2,676 volunteer farmer trainers involved with the project: 1,443 in Kenya, 1,141 in Uganda and 92 in Rwanda.

**The volunteer farmer trainers approach**

The volunteer farmer trainers approach is a form of farmer-to-farmer extension service. Volunteer farmers are trained by government extension officers, and they in turn host demonstration plots which they use for training other farmers in the community, and for seed production.

**Salient points about volunteer farmer trainers in the EADD project**

- By June 2012, 2,676 volunteer farmer trainers in Kenya, Uganda, and Rwanda were reaching dairy farmers with training and information to enable them increase their milk production under the EADD project. A third of the trainers were women.
- Volunteer farmer trainers work effectively without receiving salaries.
- Volunteer farmer trainers are driven by altruism and a commitment to respond to the demand for training from farmers in their community.
- Their voluntary work brings them early access to knowledge and technology, improved social standing, better and wider social networks, and the possibility of income from the sale of seed and services.
- The system is complementary and not a substitute to public, NGO and private-sector extension services.
- The typical volunteer farmer trainer trains 20 farmers per month. This number is the median, that is, half of the farmer trainers trained more than this number and half, fewer than this. The average number of farmers trained per trainer was actually higher, 54, because a few trainers trained large numbers of farmers, skewing the average upward.
- They reached an average of five villages outside their own, covering up to 7 km/day, and travelling mostly on foot.
- They trained 2.5 times/month during the dry season and 2.3 times per month during the wet season, spending about two hours per day for each training session.
- The most common mode of training was through farmer groups.
- Female farmer trainers were just as effective as their male counterparts in terms of their knowledge and the number of farmers they reached, even though women’s literacy levels were lower and they covered fewer villages than men.
- The farmer trainer approach is not appropriate for all practices in all circumstances. For example, it is probably not appropriate for complex, high-risk
practices, e.g. animal health. Moreover, the approach is of limited use in sparsely populated areas, unless trainers have access to transport.

• Training and backstopping a farmer trainer costs roughly US$ 160/year. Half of this cost is for a 2-day training course and half for backstopping visits.

• In western Kenya, farmer trainers were actively training farmers three years after the project supporting them had ended, indicating the sustainability of the approach.

Advantages of farmer-driven extension
Unlike traditional extension services, volunteer farmer trainers have an in-depth understanding of local conditions, culture, and practices, and are well known to the farmers they train. They live in the community, they speak the local language and use expressions that suit their environment. This instils confidence in their fellow farmers.

It is important to note that volunteer farmer trainers complement government extension services, rather than substitute them; the volunteers rely on extension staff for training as well as to address problems and questions they cannot handle on their own.

Selection of volunteer farmer trainers
In the EADD project the selection of farmer trainers is a participatory process involving farmers, locational representatives and the management committee of the Dairy Farmers’ Business Association in each project site.

Volunteer farmer trainers are typically good communicators and networkers; interested in sharing knowledge; skilled and active dairy farmers in their own right; active members of a dairy group; and willing to allocate some of their land for demonstration purposes. The farmer trainers are also permanent residents of the site.

How volunteer farmer trainers mobilize farmers for training, reach them and conduct the training
Most commonly volunteer farmers publicize their services through:

• Local and dairy management group leaders;

• Large public gatherings (such as health campaigns for, e.g., polio immunization);

• Use of mobile phones;

• Advertisements/notices posted in public places such as shops, schools and churches;

• Announcements at training sessions organized by other farmer trainers;

• Home visits; and

• Personal letters.

Depending on their catchment area, volunteer farmer trainers are able to reach fellow farmers on foot, on their personal or hired bicycles or motorcycles, or using public transport.

Training sessions may be held at various sites, including the homestead and/or demonstration sites on the volunteer farmer trainer’s land, the homesteads of trainee farmers, or a public venue such as a school, church or social hall.
Motivating volunteer farmer trainers
During the implementation of the EADD project, we have learned that volunteer farmer trainers are motivated by various things, including:

- Altruism – a desire to help fellow farmers improve their lot;
- A wish to improve the living standards of their community;
- Interest in increasing their own knowledge and skills;
- Social benefits (such as personal satisfaction, keeping busy);
- Higher social status that comes from being a trainer;
- Wider social networks;
- Project benefits (such as exchange visits to other regions/countries);
- Demand for training from fellow farmers;
- Financial benefits (e.g., from the sale of seeds within the community and payments for services such as silage making, hay baling, and chaff-cutter hire).

In the course of their work, volunteer farmer trainers incur various costs, but also gain significant benefits. The key costs and benefits are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Farmer trainers’ costs and benefits

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Costs</th>
<th>Benefits</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transport</td>
<td>Early access to knowledge and skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mobile phone airtime</td>
<td>Improved social status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meals</td>
<td>Increased social networks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bicycle maintenance</td>
<td>Exchange visits</td>
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<tr>
<td>Motorcycle wear and tear</td>
<td>Exposure to new places, people and technology</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hire of furniture (e.g., chairs) for training sessions</td>
<td>Keeping busy (particularly important for retired persons)</td>
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<td>Cost of sample seeds used during training</td>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
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<td>Opportunity cost for time spent on training</td>
<td>Renewed confidence</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Becoming associated with success</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Opportunity to become lead farmers for other projects</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Income from sale of seed and services</td>
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<td>A springboard to leadership positions in the community</td>
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Challenges faced by volunteer farmer trainers and opportunities for improving their performance
Among the challenges, volunteer farmer trainers face various opportunities for project teams to facilitate the work. For instance, the difficulty of getting HIV-affected families to participate in training sessions has been addressed by training and sensitizing all members of the community about HIV. Other challenges and related opportunities are outlined in Table 2.

Table 2: Challenges and opportunities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenges</th>
<th>Opportunities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of recognition by the community, local leaders and policy makers</td>
<td>Issue certificates, branded bags and t-shirts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of training materials</td>
<td>Assist volunteer farmer trainers to organize themselves into associations, to help raise their profile among policy makers and the development community</td>
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<tr>
<td>Long distances to reach farmers</td>
<td>Recruit more farmer trainers</td>
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<td>High expectations from farmers</td>
<td>Sensitize community about the benefits of improved practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited technical knowledge on some technologies</td>
<td>Assess needs to identify areas for more training</td>
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<td>Resistance to change by farmers</td>
<td>Technical backstopping by government extension services</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perception of threat by local leaders</td>
<td>Engage local leaders by sensitizing and involving them in training activities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family conflicts</td>
<td>Invite spouses to training sessions</td>
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Keeping volunteer farmer trainers motivated
In order to ensure sustainability of the approach, it is important to keep volunteer farmer trainers motivated. Whereas no direct financial remuneration is required beyond training and giving farmer trainers access to new technologies, several options should be considered to motivate farmer trainers and improve their performance: They include:
• Providing certificates, badges, bags, hats, t-shirts, notebooks and pens.

• Providing an allowance to buy credit for mobile phones used to communicate with farmers and service providers.

• Linking farmer trainers to seed companies so they can produce seed on contract (this also ensures a reliable supply of seed to the community).

• In Dairy Farmer Business Associations that market milk,
  * Exploring the possibility of having farmers meet the costs of training provided by farmer trainers by embedding the costs within a wider service package through a “check off system,” whereby the cost of training is deducted from milk sales.

• Exploring the possibility of providing volunteer trainers means of transport, such as bicycles and motorcycles, through a “check off system” from milk sales. This is especially useful in areas with low population density where volunteers have to cover long distances to reach farmers.

• Ensuring that farmer trainers are up to date on the latest information and innovations, by facilitating their interaction with government extension services for technical support, and with other service providers (e.g., market information services and seed suppliers).

• Helping the volunteer farmer trainers to organize themselves into associations, which helps raise their profile among policy makers and the development community.
References


Further reading


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