Spread of the VFT approach in Rwanda

Three years after the end of the EADD programme in Rwanda, VFTs are still training farmers with support from the government and NGOs. Nine organizations (four dairy cooperatives, two food crop cooperatives, two government organizations, and an NGO) have adopted the VFT approach with a few variations in the mode of operation. The high degree of adoption is as a result of the impressive work the VFTs are doing. Some organizations have also decided to broaden the VFT’s scope of work to include breeding, animal health, milk quality and hygiene. Some key attributes that make the approach attractive are:

- Cost-effectiveness: The approach is low cost since volunteer farmer trainers are not paid, they live in the community, train farmers within their neighbourhood and are able to reach many farmers within a short period of time.
- VFTs have an in-depth understanding of local conditions, culture and practices, and are well known to the farmers they train and hence have their trust.
- VFTs speak the local language and use expressions that suit their environment, which instils confidence in their fellow farmers.
- The selection process is participatory and the community plays a key role in their selection, hence the VFTs are accountable to the community.
- VFTs are role models in the community; they teach what they practise.

How to ensure sustainability of the VFT approach in Rwanda

Looking beyond the individual farmer, the biggest challenge to the VFT approach may be finding ways to sustain the volunteers down the line. Some important measures to ensure sustainability (Figure 1) include:

- Integrate the approach into government and producer organizations’ extension systems by linking VFTs with extension staff, who can backstop them.
- Link farmer trainers to seed companies so they can produce seed on contract (this also ensures a reliable supply of seed to the community).
- Provide low-cost incentives such as certificates, awards, branded t-shirts and badges.
- Provide capacity building opportunities such as exchange tours, training and reference materials.
- Help farmer trainers to organize themselves into associations which helps raise their profile among policy makers and the development community.

Policy pointers

- Integrating the volunteer farmer trainer approach with government extension services and other service providers enhances their effectiveness and efficiency.
- Low-cost non-monetary incentives such as giving volunteer farmer trainers recognition through certification, rewards, badges and training greatly enhances their credibility and performance.
- Institutionalization of the volunteer farmer trainer approach ensures that the trainers are provided with technical backstopping.
- Increased sharing of experiences on using the approach, through mechanisms such as workshops, policy briefs and videos can further enhance its performance and spread.

This policy brief highlights the experiences of the EADD project (see Box 1) and the VFT approach in Rwanda based on a study that was undertaken by surveying 86 VFTs in three districts and organizations that have adopted the approach in Rwanda.

Figure 1. Important measures for enhancing the performance of VFTs

Table 2. Summary of reasons that motivate volunteer farmer trainers to continue training

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Early access to knowledge and skills</th>
<th>Altruism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Better returns from the farm</td>
<td>Impart knowledge to family and friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire to acquire more knowledge</td>
<td>Linked to the ‘Ubudehe’ programme of collective and individual actions to help the community fight poverty</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Increased demand for training

- Linked to the ‘Girinka’ one cow per poor family programme
- More confidence in the trainers due to their good work

Social benefits

- Increase social networks, satisfaction, become famous
- Springboard to leadership positions

Project benefits

- Training
- Field tours

Income

- Sale of products associated with training, e.g. seedlings

Reference


Further reading


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Authors

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Farmer-to-farmer extension in Rwanda

The VFT approach is a type of farmer-to-farmer extension which is the provision of training by farmers, to farmers, often through the creation of a structure of farmer trainers. The current public agricultural extension system, which encompasses the Ministry of Agriculture (MINAGRI) at National to Zonal level and the Ministry of Local Government (MINALOC) at the District, Sector and Cell levels, has widely accepted the notion that extension should be provided through a pluralistic system that includes the public sector, international NGOs, the private sector and producer organizations. The voluntary-based extension embraced by the government of Rwanda is a system of voluntary farmers providing agricultural extension services to their colleagues. This system is based on the following principles: 1) voluntary service-provider farmers are innovative people, with good communication skills, living in harmony with their neighbours and who agree to work voluntarily; 2) motivation for those farmers is trainings, study tours and awards received during agricultural competitions; and 3) each voluntary extension service provider agrees to assist at least five farmers in their own neighbourhood (MINAGRI 2009).

The VFT approach in the EADD project in Rwanda

In phase I of the project which ended in 2012, EADD worked with 17 dairy cooperatives in Rwanda. Each cooperative comprised 3000-10,000 members. Farmer training was organized at the village level using a group approach. To enhance and facilitate training, farmers came together to form dairy farmer groups (DFGs). A DFG is composed of 15-20 members and forms the smallest training unit of the dairy cooperative. Most farmer training is organized at this level. The dairy cooperatives also provided various services to farmers, including: (1) bulkling and selling of milk, providing income to farmers; and (2) technical support, artificial insemination for their animals.

Selection of volunteer farmer trainers

As of June 2012, 92 VFTs had been recruited in Rwanda. They were selected through a participatory process involving their DFGs, dissemination facilitators and the dairy cooperatives using the following criteria:
- The ability to read and write
- The ability to interpret extension material to farmers
- Membership in a farmer organization or cooperative society working with the EADD project
- An active dairy farmer
- Willing, able and interested in disseminating new innovations and knowledge to others without pay
- A resident in the community
- Willing to set aside land for setting up demonstration plots.

Table 1. Practices disseminated by volunteer farmer trainers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grasses</th>
<th>Fodder legumes</th>
<th>Other feed practices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rhodes grass</td>
<td>Desmodium</td>
<td>Hay-making using a hay box</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Napier/elephant grass</td>
<td>Calliandra</td>
<td>Paddocking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brachiaria</td>
<td>Mucuna</td>
<td>Pasture seed production</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucerne</td>
<td></td>
<td>Silage-making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leucaena diversifolia</td>
<td></td>
<td>Use of pulverizer to process crop residues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Feed ration formulation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Facts about volunteer farmer trainers in the EADD programme in Rwanda

VFTs in three districts (Gatsibo, Rwamagana and Nyagatare) reached farmers with training and information (Table 1) to enable them increase their milk production. Most of these farmers are under the ‘one cow per poor family’ programme.
- Volunteer farmer trainers work effectively without receiving salaries. They, however, receive compensation for transportation whenever they participate in meetings.
- A third of farmer trainers are women.
- Gaining confidence is the most important social benefit for women VFTs whereas increased social networks is important for men.
- The average farmer trainer about 24 farmers per month.
- They cover an average of four villages outside their own, covering up to 7.6 km/day.
- They travel mostly on foot, on their personal or hired bicycles, motorcycles, or use public transport.
- They train three times a month irrespective of the season, spending about 2 hours per day for each training session.
- Mode of training is through farmer groups.
- Women VFTs are as competent as men in the knowledge they possess and the number of farmers they reach, even though women’s literacy levels are lower and they cover fewer villages.

How volunteer farmer trainers mobilize farmers for training, reach them and conduct training

Volunteer farmers are able to reach fellow farmers in their community through various avenues. Most often, they publicize their services through:
- Local authorities and dairy farmer group leaders
- Large public gatherings (e.g. health campaigns, e.g. polo immunization, during weekly public cleaning exercises)
- Use of mobile phones
- Adverts/notifications posted in public places such as shops, schools and churches
- House visits
- Milk transporters
- Monthly community meetings known as ‘Umuganda.’

Training sessions may be held at various sites, such as the home and/or demonstration sites on the volunteer farmers’ land, the homes of trainee farmers, or a public venue such as a school, church or social hall.

What motivates volunteer farmer trainers?

Our experience working with volunteer farmer trainers indicates that reasons that motivate VFTs to train are not static; they vary among farmers and change from time to time depending on (i) level of experience of the trainers, (ii) the context, and (iii) market opportunities for inputs and services. The main motivations, in order of importance, for VFTs to train others are: access to knowledge and skills, increased demand for training, altruism, social benefits, project benefits and income from associated activities (Table 2).