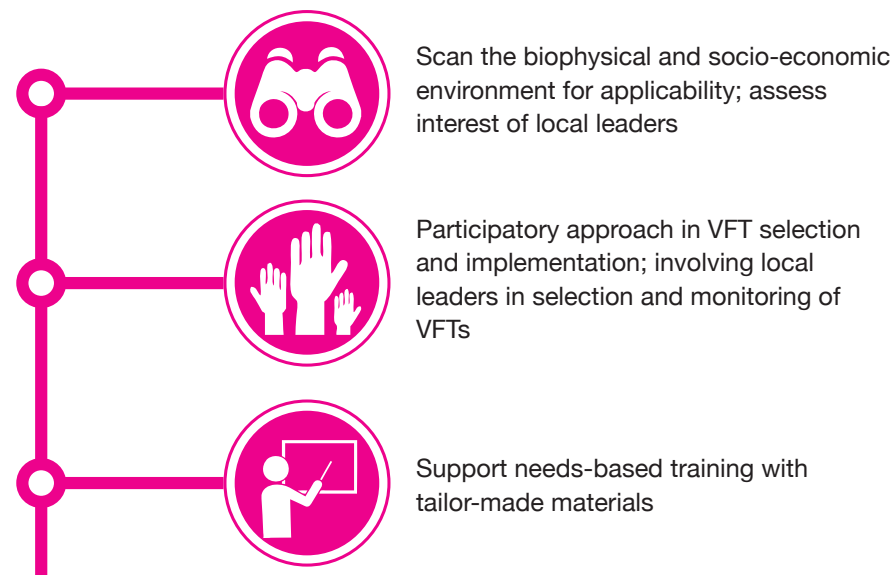
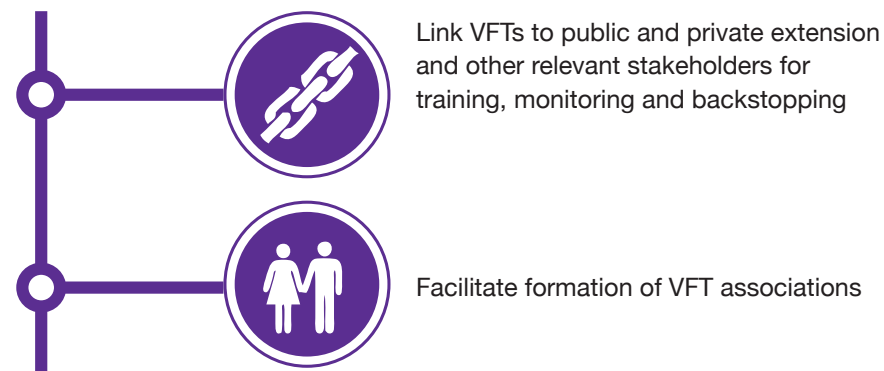


Contextualize the VFT approach



Institutionalize the VFT approach within the existing agricultural extension system



Scale up the VFT approach



Citation:

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Mr. Jjemba trains farmers and tree nursery operators on nursery establishment

Background

Producing and selling milk in Uganda provides a great opportunity for a regular income and a healthy family diet. It is not an easy business though. There is much to learn about keeping your dairy cows healthy and productive. A relatively low cost approach to teaching many farmers about good dairying and other farming practices, using Volunteer Farmer Trainers (VFTs) was studied in 11 districts in Uganda. The researchers explored how well 190 VFTs did in learning about improved dairy practices, and then sharing their new knowledge, information and materials with fellow farmers. They examined the methods the VFTs used to reach other farmers, the extent to which they were reaching female as well as male farmers, and what specific dairy technologies and information they were sharing.

Is training VFTs an effective strategy and investment in increasing the productivity of smallholders? The assessment suggests that it has good synergies with, and adds value to, existing agricultural extension services. It also shows that there are low-cost ways of improving the VFT approach that could make it more sustainable in the long run without donor support.

There are over 20 million people living in rural agricultural households in Uganda and food security remains a serious

issue. Agricultural research and extension services have changed over the last 10 years, but still struggle to provide the needed support and services to such a large number of farmers, half of whom are female, working in a wide and diverse range of environments. Uganda, like many other countries, is now coming to the realization that its female farmers – so key in terms of household food security and nutrition – have their own unique needs that can differ significantly from those of male farmers, yet they have been relatively neglected.

Thus many projects and programs of development practitioners and research organizations have been testing new and innovative approaches aimed at better understanding the different needs of farmers and extending the reach of information on improved farming practices. One such approach is that of 'farmer-to-farmer extension' - the provision of training by farmers, to farmers, often through the creation of a structure of farmer-trainers. For example, the East Africa Dairy Development Project (EADD) has been using the volunteer farmer trainer approach to disseminate information and knowledge on improved feed technologies and management strategies to dairy farmers in Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda and Tanzania.

The East Africa Dairy Development Project (EADD)

The EADD project is a collaboration of Heifer International, Technoserve, International Livestock Research Institute, African Breeders Services Total Cattle Management and the World Agroforestry Centre (ICRAF). Launched in 2008, the project aims to benefit 315,000 dairy farmers in Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda and Tanzania through improved dairy production and marketing. The project has been using the volunteer farmer trainer approach to strengthen farmers' capacities and disseminate dairy technologies, with great success. The volunteer farmer trainers train fellow farmers on livestock feed crops (grasses and legumes including fodder shrubs), feed conservation methods such as silage and hay baling, feed formulation and climate-smart agricultural practices.

The volunteer trainer experience in the EADD project in Uganda

- In 2014 there were 1,141 VFTs trained through EADD; 33% of them were female.
- VFTs set up demonstration plots on their own farms, both for training other farmers in the community and for seed production. By December 2012, VFTs in Uganda had established 1,012 fodder demonstration plots.
- On average, each VFT trained 16 farmers each month. Most of the farmers trained were members of the VFT's village farmer group.
- 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 VFT approach is not appropriate for all practices in all circumstances. For example, in Uganda, it was not appropriate for sparsely populated areas, unless transport was available.
- Experiences in Kenya show that VFTs remained active after donor support ended, suggesting that this approach is sustainable.
- VFTs complement, rather than substitute, public, NGO and private sector extension services. The volunteers rely on extension staff for training and to address issues they cannot handle on their own.

Selection and training of volunteer farmers

The selection of farmer trainers is a participatory process involving farmers, community representatives and management committee members of producer organizations in each project site. Criteria for choosing VFTs include good networking and communication skills, and a demonstrated interest in sharing knowledge. They should be full-time local farmers with good farming skills, be active in local groups, and willing to allocate some of their land for demonstration purposes. After recruitment, volunteer farmers are trained by specialists, often through a project such as the EADD. Government extension officers then provide follow-up periodic trainings, and respond to emerging challenges.

Advantages of the VFT approach

- It is low-cost as the farmer trainers volunteer their services.
- Unlike conventional 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.
- Because they live in the community, they speak the local language and use expressions that suit their environment, which instils confidence in their fellow farmers.
- Because VFTs "practise what they preach" on their own farms, fellow farmers can observe the techniques and outcomes on the VFT's farms, which can lower perceived risks of trying the innovations.
- VFTs can help extension services increase their coverage.
- VFTs strengthen capacity and empower communities.

Cost of the VFT approach

VFTs need to cover their own costs, which may include: transport, mobile phone airtime, meals, bicycle or motorcycle maintenance, hiring of chairs, and the cost of sample seeds used in trainings. In the case of the EADD project in Uganda, training and backstopping a VFT costs around US\$476,000 (US\$160) per year, assuming a one-day community meeting for recruitment, a two-day training course, and two one-day farm learning tours. Additional costs include routine backstopping visits by extension staff (travel and subsistence costs estimated at around US\$80), plus the opportunity cost of the VFT's time spent on training (i.e. lost time that they could have spent on their own farms).

VFT approaches to mobilizing and training farmers

Volunteer farmers are able to reach fellow farmers in their communities through various avenues. In the EADD project, for example, all are members of dairy groups so group members form a natural constituency for training. In general, they publicize and provide services through:

- Producer organizations
- Large public gatherings (e.g. during health campaigns)
- 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
- House visits
- Personal letters.

Volunteer farmer trainers typically reach fellow farmers on foot, by personal or hired bicycles or motorcycles, or via public transport. Training sessions are held at various venues, including the homestead and/or demonstration sites on the volunteer farmer trainer's farm, the homesteads of trainee farmers, or a public venue such as a school, church or social hall.

Volunteer farmer trainers' motivations

The EADD project experience showed that VFTs are motivated by, in order of importance:

- Interest in increasing their own knowledge and skills for improving their own farms;
- Altruism – a desire to help fellow farmers improve their livelihoods;

- Higher social status that comes from being a trainer;
- Wider social networks;
- Demand for training from fellow farmers.
- Financial benefits from associated activities (e.g. from the sale of seed and fees for services)

Challenges and opportunities

Key challenges, as ranked by 190 VFTs in Uganda, include: lack of transport, societal resistance to change, insufficient technical knowledge, high expectations, lack of training materials, poor incentives, family conflicts and local politics. These constraints also provide opportunities. Some of the solutions offered by VFTs in the EADD project, for example, included provision of bicycles by their cooperatives through a check-off system where deductions are made from their milk revenues. Other suggestions included access to more knowledge on improved agricultural practices, training materials and the involvement of both spouses during training to lessen intra-household conflicts.

Insights and recommendations for supporting improved farming practices in Uganda

1. Institutionalize the VFT approach within the existing agricultural extension system:
 - Link VFTs to public and private extension and other relevant stakeholders for trainings, monitoring and backstopping.
 - Facilitate formation of VFT associations
2. Contextualize the VFT approach:
 - Scan the biophysical and socio-economic environment for applicability
 - Use a participatory approach in VFT recruitment by involving community leaders
 - Support needs-based trainings with tailor-made training materials
3. Scale up the VFT approach:
 - Expand coverage across all districts in Uganda
 - Provide low-cost incentives for participation, such as regular trainings and awards

For further information

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