East Africa Dairy Development

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THE VOLUNTEER FARMER TRAINER EXTENSION APPROACH

A USER GUIDE

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Norah Bett, a volunteer farmer trainer in her calliandra demonstration plot in Kenya
Photo: ©ICRAF/Josephine Kirui

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List of Abbreviations & Acronyms

ABi	Agribusiness Initiative
DIG	Dairy Interest Group
EADD	East Africa Dairy Development
HI	Heifer International
ICRAF	World Agroforestry Centre
KALRO	Kenya Agricultural and Livestock Research Organization
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
VFT	Volunteer Farmer Trainer

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1. INTRODUCTION

Extension services are delivered in a variety of forms, with the ultimate aim of changing farmers' attitudes towards applying knowledge and practices that increase productivity and income. However, how farmers gain access to knowledge and information on improved practices along the intended value chain is extremely important. An effective approach encourages farmers to change their attitudes and perceptions, which in turn increases knowledge and promotes uptake of agricultural practices, technologies and other innovations. Application of good agricultural practices and use of technologies in production systems increase productivity and farm income. The mode of dissemination can influence the agricultural knowledge and skills that farmers acquire. The success of technology dissemination greatly depends on the effectiveness of the mode of delivery used to reach the clients.

The use of innovative approaches and strategies to increase coverage is therefore, becoming a major concern for all stakeholders involved in agricultural advisory service delivery. In East Africa, several extension approaches have been used in the delivery of extension services. The traditional extension approaches were top-down, commodity-based, non-participatory and instructional, and were structured and operated with the assumption that farmers were largely ignorant and unable to integrate new practices into their farming systems. These approaches tended to produce poor results because farmers felt no sense of ownership over the ideas imposed on them.

This failure resulted in the emergence of approaches that were bottom-up, participatory, and whose main aim was to educate farmers about various options rather than to prescribe solutions. These participatory approaches involved farmers from the problem identification stage to the design of solutions, right up to their production constraints. Although a significant impact was realized from these participatory approaches, productivity, uptake and use of technologies and innovations were relatively low. The East Africa Dairy Development (EADD) Project, a project to improve the livelihoods of dairy farmers in Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda and Tanzania, adopted the Volunteer Farmer Trainer (VFT) extension approach, a form of farmer-to-farmer extension, in 2008 to increase impact. This approach is the subject of this guide.

Faroh a farmer trainer from Rwanda conducts a demonstration in his Rhodes grass plot.

Photo: ©ICRAF/Benjamin Nzigamasabo

1.1 Objectives of the Guide

The main objective of this guide is to support extension service providers, farmer organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in designing and using the VFT extension approach in the promotion of productivity-enhancing initiatives. The guide is based on practical lessons and experiences gained in the use of the VFT extension approach in the EADD project implemented in Kenya, Uganda and Rwanda.

The specific objectives of this guide are:

1. To provide guidelines on the use of the VFT approach in extension service delivery;
2. To promote the use of a cost effective and sustainable extension approach, VFT, in the dissemination of knowledge and technologies to the farmers; and
3. To share experiences and lessons from EADD projects on the use of the VFT extension approach.

1.2. Users of the VFT Guide

This guide is based on lessons learned during the implementation of the feeds and feeding system component of the EADD project among smallholder farmers. The publication will be useful for frontline extension service providers, value chain actors and other advisory service providers involved in rural development. It can also educate farmers, policymakers, extension delivery systems and researchers on the future design of effective dissemination approaches for agricultural knowledge and technologies.

Background

The VFT extension approach involves trained farmers, who train fellow farmers. The volunteers are trained by government extension officers, NGO staff and researchers and they, in turn, host demonstration plots which they use for training other farmers in the community. The VFTs' extension work complements, and is not a substitute for, public, NGO or private sector extension services.

Unlike traditional extension workers, VFTs live in the community and can thus be effective in guiding the community based on their in-depth understanding of local conditions, culture and practices. The approach works because the trainer can explain concepts in the local language and use expressions that suit the local environment.

Other advantages are ease of reaching fellow farmers and membership in the community, which instils confidence in their fellow farmers. Farmers readily learn from fellow farmers and they easily copy what other farmers are doing.

2. USING THE VFT EXTENSION APPROACH

2.1. Deciding Whether or not to Use the VFT Extension Approach

It is important to know whether the culture, norms, values and background of the target community will support the VFT extension approach. Some questions that may be asked in this regard are:

1. Has the approach been tried before and was it successful? If it was not successful, are there ways it can be changed to make it work?
2. Is the local leadership supportive in the use of this extension approach? What advantages and challenges do they foresee?
3. Are there cultural, ecological, socio-economic and environmental factors that could make the approach easy or difficult to implement? For example, in areas of low population density where people live far from each other, it may be difficult for VFTs to reach farmers. In areas where farmers are organized into groups, it will be easier for VFTs to organize training events.
4. Are the enterprises and practices being promoted suitable for promotion by VFTs? If practices are complex or involve great risk, it may be more appropriate to have extension staff conducting the training rather than farmers.

If stakeholders agree that the approach is promising, the next step is to select VFTs.

2.2. Selection and Recruitment of VFTs

The process of selection/recruitment of VFTs is outlined below:

Step 1: Before selecting VFTs, sensitization of farmers through farmer organizations and farmer groups is carried out on each site so that farmers can learn about the approach.

Step 2: The various stakeholders involved in the programme decide on the criteria to be used for selecting VFTs. The selection criteria in the EADD project considered the following factors:

- Ability to read and write;
- Good communication skills;

- Must be a practising farmer;
- Must be generally acceptable by the community and of good moral standing;
- Available to, and reachable by, other farmers;
- Hard working/role model;
- Acceptable behaviour and trustworthy;
- Willing to work without pay;
- Able to mobilize community members; and
- Willing to set aside land for a demonstration plot.

Step 3 Select the VFT: An agreed process for selecting VFTs is arrived at through a participatory approach involving farmers' groups and organizations. In the EADD project, farmers' groups selected VFTs.

Those backstopping the VFTs should make it clear what benefits the volunteers will receive and the activities and costs that will attract compensation, (e.g., mobile phone air time, transportation and lunch allowances while training farmers). In the EADD project, VFTs are given free inputs for demonstration plots, but are not compensated for airtime or transportation expenses.

Misunderstandings about such issues may have a negative impact on the relationship between VFTs and organizations backstopping them.

2.3. VFT Training

Effective delivery of extension messages depends on the level of knowledge and skills of the VFTs. To effectively prepare VFTs for extension work, it is necessary to:

- Undertake a capacity needs assessment of the farmers: A training needs assessment will gather information to determine the gaps in terms of knowledge and skills required by farming groups for increased productivity. This entails conducting a simple question-answer appraisal session with the farmers on what needs to be done and how it should be done;
- Prioritize the identified training needs through a participatory approach;
- Develop a training module;
- Organize training sessions for VFTs using the training module; and
- Use different methods of training/learning, e.g., establishing or visiting demonstration plots, exchange visits or field days.

Farmer trainers in Kenya learning how to make silage. Photo: ©ICRAF/Sylvia Wafula

The VFTs are then taken through basic training sessions on the practices being promoted (e.g. establishment of different fodders, feed conservation methods such as hay and silage making, crop residue processing, preservation storage and utilization). Functional skills, such as communication and extension methods are included. In the EADD project, the initial training session lasts four days. Refresher training sessions are held periodically, depending on need.

2.4. How VFTs Mobilize Farmers

After training, the VFTs mobilize and train other farmers. Mobilizing farmers is done by various methods, including:

- Publicizing through local and dairy management group leaders. In most cases, VFTs are members of dairy farmer groups and their primary responsibility is to train fellow group members;
- Publicizing through large public gatherings (such as health campaigns, e.g., polio immunization);
- Use of mobile phones;
- Posting advertisements/notices in public places such as shops, schools, churches, and milk and tea collection centres;
- Making announcements during training sessions organized by fellow VFTs;
- Making house visits; and
- Sending personal letters.

2.5. Other Important Roles and Responsibilities of VFTs

In addition to mobilizing and training farmers, VFTs have other roles and responsibilities which include:

- Monitoring project activities. These may include documenting names of farmers trained, their gender and topics covered. Care should be taken not to overburden VFTs with monitoring activities or they may not collect any information at all. For example, if you ask them to fill out a 5-page questionnaire about each training event, they would likely decline to fill it out and you are left with no information about the training event. But if you ask them to only record names of farmers trained, their gender and topics covered, there is a high likelihood that they will agree to do this.
- Identifying bottlenecks farmers face in adopting new practices and modifications that they make in using them;
- Serving as links between community and extension and other stakeholders;
- Sensitizing community members and leaders on their roles as VFTs; and
- Referring difficult issues to other extension service providers.

2.6. Women and Youth Involvement as VFTs

Deliberate efforts should be made to recruit women and youth as VFTs, thereby increasing their participation in the provision of extension services. The following strategies promote participation of women and youth as VFTs:

- Have a flexible training curriculum that encourages the participation of women and youth as VFTs, e.g., avoid residential training sessions, conduct training during times when it is convenient for women;
- Provide child day-care during training sessions;
- Set quotas for women and youth VFTs in every farmer organization;
- Train extension service providers on the importance of having female and youth VFTs, and the need to make deliberate efforts to recruit them; and
- Encourage women and youth to form and join farmers' groups.

3. SUSTAINABILITY OF THE APPROACH

3.1. What Motivates VFTs to Volunteer their Services?

Our surveys show that the motivations, in approximate order of importance, are:

a. Knowledge Gained

VFTs are community members who are eager to learn and share information, and are normally the entry points for development organizations. They receive technical assistance and learn how to utilize acquired knowledge and technologies for increased productivity and income.

b. Altruism/Service to the Community

Since most VFTs are selected from farmer groups, they have the passion to help other farmers without necessarily expecting rewards. They strive to improve the livelihood of members in the groups to which they belong.

Farmer trainers learning in a demonstration plot. Photo: ©ICRAF/Josephine Kirui

c. **Material Benefits**

Since VFTs are the hosts of the demonstration plots, they benefit through accessing planting and demonstration materials, and other promotional products such as t-shirts and caps.

d. **Social Benefits**

- Recognition from community leaders and others elevates their social status, which could be a springboard to leadership positions in the community;
- Improved exposure as a result of their participation in exchange tours, seminars and workshops;
- Increased social networks as a result of interactions with many people; and
- Increased confidence in their ability to teach others to play an active role in community affairs.

e. **Market Creation and Earning Cash from Products and Services**

Most of the VFTs have diversified their farm enterprises. Participation in training of other farmers leads to an increased market base for their products in their respective value chains. For instance, VFTs can make yoghurt and mala/*murzik* to sell to other farmers when they visit the farms.

VFTs benefit from selling other products and services related to their fodder enterprises such as:

- Seed multiplication and sale;
- Hay and leaf meal production for sale;
- Leasing out of feed processing machines like pulverisers and brush cutters; and
- Receiving fees (in cash or kind) from other farmers for training or when farmers visit their farms (agro-tourism).

Extension service providers can make their VFT programmes more effective and sustainable by understanding which motivations are most important to their trainers and providing low-cost incentives to keep them motivated (Table 1):

- Trainers interested in altruism and social benefits, may be recognized through provision of items such as certificates and t-shirts and through public recognition from local leaders. Contests to reward the most effective VFTs could be utilized to motivate them, but the process of selecting winners needs to be transparent and viewed as fair by all.
- Training, literature and visits with researchers and innovative farmers are important for those interested in increasing their knowledge.
- For those interested in earning income from associated services, helping link VFTs to clients interested in buying their services is important.

Table 1: Matching incentives to VFTs' motivations

Motivation	Incentives
Altruism, social status	Contests, certificates, badges, t-shirts, community recognition
Increasing knowledge	Training, study tours, training materials, interactions with researchers
Income	Links to buyers of inputs and services

EADD team visit a demonstration plot in Rwanda. Photo: ©ICRAF/Josephine Kirui

3.2. Other Factors which Contribute to Sustainability

Many of the trainers are acting or have acted as VFTs for other stakeholder organizations. This adds value to their work as they already have experience in training farmers, and there is a greater likelihood that they will continue working as VFTs after the current project or initiative ends. Working as a VFT for other organizations adds value to the extension method and equips the VFT with a more holistic suite of practices. The links created with various stakeholders promote learning, practice, entrepreneurship and experimentation.

Case Study

The case study cited below shows how a VFT increased her income from milk production and trained fellow farmers.

Case Study of Lydia Jjemba

In an attempt to improve smallholder farmers' access to information for a stronger dairy sector, the East Africa Dairy Development project adopted the VFT approach, which promotes peer learning among the region's dairy farmers. Out of over 2,676 VFTs trained in the region (Uganda, Kenya and Rwanda) between 2008 and 2013, one-third were women.

Lydia Jjemba, 53, is one such VFT who has risen to national fame following her recent award as the best woman achiever of 2013 in agriculture, by Uganda's leading daily newspaper, the *New Vision*. Lydia lives in Namayumba village, Luguza Parish, Wakiso District. The married mother of four started her journey 10 years ago with just one dairy cow, a grant from the NGO, Send A Cow, Uganda. She subsequently joined the growing club of female dairy farmers in Namayumba, district, located about 40km from Kampala.

Acquiring an improved-breed cow resulted in an instant improvement as it gave her six litres of milk daily. She consumed two litres and sold the remaining four for Ugandan Shs400 (USD 0.21) at the nearby milk collection point. However, this was not enough for the enterprising mother of four; she needed more milk if she was to earn enough to live on.

In 2008, she was informed of a farmer sensitization meeting organized by the East Africa Dairy Development (EADD) project and it took no persuasion to get her to attend the first of many training sessions that the EADD was offering to farmers in the area.

Jjemba became a VFT in the same year, after being selected by her Dairy Interest Group (DIG) members and recommended by her Dairy Farmer Business Association, BUBUSI Dairy Cooperative Society. She trains 20 farmers in her DIG (Kyosiga). She also trains three other groups outside her village, the farthest located about 10km from her home.

She learned that to increase milk production, one had to improve the quality of the dairy breeds and the level of animal nutrition, and ensure that proper animal health and hygienic milk production practices are upheld.

"I am a practical person, so I always want to immediately try out each and everything I learn," Lydia said when asked when she started to apply the knowledge she had received. "My goal was to improve my income and general well-being so I had to give it a try the first chance I got," she adds.

At one of the training workshops she attended, she received pasture seeds of different species like calliandra, Russian cornfey, Rhodes grass, Napier grass and lablab, which she multiplied and now grows on her farm. She also learned feed conservation technologies that would secure feeds for her animals during the dry seasons.

Lydia Jjemba a farmer trainer, demonstrates how to make mineral blocks. Photo: ©ICRAF/Jane Kugonza

According to her, change was rapid: in a few months, her cow was producing an average of 17 litres of milk daily. This meant she could now sell 15 litres, almost four times what she had been selling in the past. With the start of lactation of her second cow, she was able to milk an extra 15 litres, bringing her total milk production to 32 litres daily.

The training sessions with her DIG are conducted every first and last Wednesday of the month from either her own farm or another farmer's. Training topics vary depending on members' needs, although most of them involve organic farming, fodder conservation, dairy management and tree nursery management.

Her volunteer work has brought her greater social status. She testifies to increased networks within her village and beyond. The work has also brought her greater knowledge, and not just from the training she has received.

"I have had a chance to interact with and learn from so many progressive farmers within Uganda and during the regional study tours that I have attended," she says.

4. CONCLUSION

Strengths in Implementing VFT Programmes

A number of strengths are associated with the VFT extension approach:

- VFTs understand the local culture, environment and socio-economic characteristics of the residents;
- Information sharing among farmers is enhanced;
- The cost of sharing information is relatively low compared to other extension approaches;
- Enhanced sustainability of extension efforts, as VFTs often continue training after projects supporting them come to an end;
- Extension messages are site-specific when addressing farming needs;
- VFTs can provide useful information on how new practices are performing, the constraints farmers face and modifications they make in implementing them.

Some Challenges in Implementing VFT Programmes

- Farmers have high expectations in terms of financial and non-financial rewards, despite organizations' attempts to reduce such expectations;
- Limited budgets for supporting VFTs is a significant problem;
- Organizations backstopping VFTs need to ensure that (1) the quality of information provided by VFTs is high; and (2) that farmers can access inputs for practices that VFTs are promoting, e.g., seed.

Farmer trainers in Uganda learn how to make a home-made dairy ration. Photo: ©ICRAF/Pius Lutakome

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Abraham Kiprotich, a volunteer farmer trainer in his Lucerne demonstration plot in Kenya.

Photo: ©ICRAF/Sherry Odeyo

This guide is based on research and experience on the Volunteer Farmer Trainer extension approach under the East Africa Dairy Development (EADD) Project, which began in 2008. The EADD project, funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, aims to double small-scale dairy farmers' incomes by using integrated interventions in the dairy value chain using the hub model approach in Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda and Tanzania.

The project is implemented by a consortium of five partners: Heifer International (HI), which is the lead partner, Technoserve (TNS), African Breeder Services (ABS), the World Agroforestry Centre (ICRAF), and the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI). The initiative aims to double the income of 315,000 small-scale dairy farmers.

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