Highlights
CIAT in Africa

Village information centres

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Access to appropriate technical information is critical for farmers and central to rural development in Africa. All too often farmers experience difficulty in accessing agricultural information at critical times during the year. Communities that embark on new agricultural activities or those who are carrying out research activities in partnership with other organisations are particularly needful of this kind of information. Even when technical materials are distributed to extension workers and farmers, there are often not enough copies to go around. Those that receive copies of these materials are often reluctant to share them widely amongst other farmers. This resulting lack of information can lead to a decrease in farmers' agricultural production, and to difficulties in planning and implementing farmer field experiments.

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Information at local level

The dream of having a local facility for technical information became a reality for some Tanzanian farmers in 2001 when they established their own "village information centre" (VIC). This is a library facility that holds technical materials on agriculture (and other areas such as health, education, environment, etc.) which are readily available to everyone in the wider community. The first centre was established with the support of CIAT and its local Tanzanian partners (the district and village authorities) as a way of disseminating information on integrated pest management technologies. It was quickly realised that the centre could be more effective if it stocked a wider range of information on a variety of subject areas of concern to the local communities.

The concept of a VIC is gaining popularity and other centres are now established elsewhere in Tanzania, as well as in Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda and Uganda. The information centres have also developed further to become resource centres beyond agriculture. They hold information about local events and in many communities they also provide a convenient space for local meetings and for training purposes.

The first centre

In 2001, farmers in Hai district in Northern Tanzania worked together with support from staff of a DFID-supported project to develop their own extension materials (such as manuals, leaflets, posters, videos and radio scripts) on integrated pest management (IPM). The materials were disseminated locally but did not reach all local farmers groups. In some cases these farmers were forced to wait for a visit from the extension worker for their questions to be answered. These groups began calling for better local access to the IPM extension materials that they had been closely associated with.

After some discussions, the idea of a local library to house a range of materials (including the IPM information) emerged as a realistic solution. The library

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How to establish a VIC

CIAT and its partners have developed an application procedure (including a list of criteria that must be fulfilled) for financial support to be approved for a new village information centre. Communities must prove their commitment to the centre by, for example, providing the space (in same instances this is provided through a local organisation), and by forming a committee to manage and take care of it. Development of a village information centre is not excessively costly. The average cost of set-up for a VIC housed in an existing building with basic furniture is in the range of US$300. Construction costs are additional and will depend on the location.

would be located in a community and serve a number of villages. The farmers lobbied for space to be allocated in existing buildings to house their proposed centre and, with some financial support for the purchase of basic furniture, the first VIC was born! The village information centre model has been developed and supported by CIAT and its partner organisations (World Vision International, ADRA, Farm Africa, Ministries of Agriculture and Local Government), with VICs established in five project participating countries in Eastern and Southern Africa.

Centres in the region and beyond

Currently, there are a total of forty village information centres in Eastern and Southern Africa. There are thirty centres dotted around rural Rwanda. Six village information centres have been established in Tanzania. Partner organisations in Kenya, Malawi and Uganda have also started their own pilot centres, with more centres planned for 2005. The VICs offer a broad range of materials on different topics in English, French and many local languages. Each centre stocks extension materials in a range of subject areas, covering Agriculture, Education, Environment and Health. In addition, the VICs are multi-functional. They are often used as convenient training centres, and they are a useful resource for local schools. Some VICs have been established with financial assistance from institutions that were interested in utilising the same centre for training activities. For example, furniture for two VICs in western Kenya was supplied from the Ministries of Health and Education, who went on to use the facility for HIV/AIDS awareness promotion and adult literacy campaigns, respectively.

Lessons learned

CIAT and its partners have learned some valuable lessons about village information centres since 2001. Successful centres are those which are operated by motivated and organised farmers groups. Local workers must be available to staff the centres on a full-time, voluntary basis. Each community should have a management committee to organise issues such as staffing, cleaning, record-keeping, and publicising the centre to the wider community. Communities are advised to monitor the number of users, as well as details of the materials held.

Monitoring & Evaluation

The VICs have been monitored in order to establish usage by the community and whether or not the facility might need to be upgraded or developed further. The 'librarian' asks the users to indicate what material was useful and what was not, as well as what other materials they would like to see stocked in the VIC. Through this process changes and adjustments are made to suit local needs. For example in Rwanda, neighbouring communities whose members visit on market days requested to buy some of the publications. The money generated from the sale of the publications is used in a revolving fund to continue to run the facility sustainably.

An evaluation of the uses of VICs is planned. Initial reports are encouraging: for example, in Kwasadala village, Tanzania, over 500 people (men and women) have used the centre (equivalent to about one quarter of the local population in that area). They are used for consultation purposes mainly; with many centres doubling up as local training centres. Most centres are open from 8am to 5pm, from Mondays to Saturdays inclusive.

Village information centres improve farmers' access to appropriate technical information. This information is empowering, enabling farmers to take more control over their lives (for example, they can make decisions on how to improve the management of their crop and livestock agroenterprises).

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