

Extension services in Rwanda take up the volunteer farmer trainer approach



ICRAF/Benjamin Nzigamasabo

A Rwandan farmer trainer shows a visitor Rhodes grass from his demonstration plot.

KEY PARTNERS

World Agroforestry Centre (ICRAF), International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI), East Africa Dairy Development program, Heifer International, the Rwanda Agriculture Board, the CGIAR Research Program on Forests, Trees, and Agroforestry, FoodAfrica project funded by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Finland

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CORRESPONDING RESEARCHERS

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How best to help smallholder farmers access information and advice they need to increase their productivity is an unsolved puzzle. Work led by the World Agroforestry Centre and the International Livestock Research Institute with support from the CGIAR Research Program on Policies, Institutions, and Markets (PIM) and other partners in East Africa showed that volunteer farmer trainers (VFTs) can be successful agents of change. VFTs are highly effective, training on average 20 farmers per month. They have deep knowledge of local conditions, culture, and practices, since they live in the community and speak the same language as their clients. They instill confidence in their fellow farmers.

The VFT approach is a form of farmer-to-farmer extension. Volunteer farmers are recruited, trained, and in turn, train other farmers on improved agricultural practices.

In 2008, in an effort to increase the productivity of the dairy sector in Kenya, Rwanda, and Uganda, a consortium of five partners funded by the Bill & Melinda

Key facts

- › The East Africa Dairy Development program successfully used the volunteer farmer trainer (VFT) approach in Kenya, Rwanda, and Uganda.
- › PIM-supported research on the VFT approach was in part responsible for its uptake by 21 development organizations in Rwanda.
- › Three years after the end of the EADD program in Rwanda, VFTs are still training farmers with support from the government, NGOs, and producer organizations.

Gates Foundation initiated the [East Africa Dairy Development \(EADD\) program](#). The program has been using the VFT approach to facilitate the spread of information on high-quality feeds and feeding practices through training, experimentation, and learning since its inception.

In 2015, the ICRAF team with support from EADD, PIM, and the CGIAR Research Program on Forests, Trees, and Agroforestry published a [study](#) that examined VFTs' perceptions, motivations, dissemination activities, and competence, as well as the challenges they face.

According to the study, the main benefits of VFT programs are increased numbers of farmers reached; greater adoption because farmers were more willing to learn from their neighbors who have been using new technologies; and enhanced sustainability of extension efforts, as volunteer trainers often continue working after projects end. VFTs can also dramatically increase women's access to extension services—many organizations find it easier to recruit female farmer trainers than to hire more highly trained female extension staff.

Three years after the end of the EADD program in Rwanda, VFTs are still training farmers with support from the government and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Twenty-one organizations, including 16 dairy cooperatives, 2 food crop cooperatives, 2 government organizations, and an NGO, have adopted the VFT approach, or modified their own VFT approach as a consequence of their exposure to it in the EADD program or to results of the research on the approach. Among these, the Rwanda Agriculture Board (RAB) started its own “farmer promoter” program in 2012, a modified VFT program that now has 14,200 farmer promoters.

The high degree of adoption is a result of the VFTs' impressive work. Some organizations have broadened the VFTs' scope of work to include breeding, animal health, milk quality, and hygiene. Others such as RAB's farmer promoters, focus on food crops. The organizations particularly appreciated that the VFT approach allowed them to reach many more farmers, with only a slight increase in costs.

Lessons learned

- › Linking formally to VFTs enables government extension services and other service providers to enhance their own effectiveness and efficiency as well as that of the VFTs.
- › Low-cost, nonmonetary incentives, such as recognizing VFTs through certification, rewards, badges, and contests, greatly enhances their credibility and performance.
- › Institutionalization of the VFT approach ensures that the trainers are provided with technical backstopping.
- › Increased sharing of experiences with the approach, through mechanisms such as workshops, policy briefs, and videos, can further enhance its performance and spread.

Related research outputs

- › Kiptot, E., S. Franzel, P. B. Nzigamasabo, and C. Ruganirwa. 2016. [Volunteer Farmer Trainers Boost Rwanda's Dairy Sector with Information on Improved Livestock Feed Practices](#). Policy Brief 35. Nairobi: World Agroforestry Centre.
- › Kiptot, E., S. Franzel, P. B. Nzigamasabo, and C. Ruganirwa. 2015. [Farmer-to-Farmer Extension of Livestock Feed Technologies in Rwanda: A Survey of Volunteer Farmer Trainers and Organizations](#). ICRAF Working Paper 221. Nairobi: World Agroforestry Centre.
- › Kiptot, E., M. Karuhanga, S. Franzel, and P. B. Nzigamasabo. 2016. [Volunteer Farmer-Trainer Motivations in East Africa: Practical Implications for Enhancing Farmer-to-Farmer Extension](#). *International Journal of Agricultural Sustainability* 14 (30): 339-356.
- › Kirui, J., S. Franzel, E. Kipton, J. Kugonza, P. M. Ongadi, R. Wabwire, S. Nanjekho, E. Karanja, P. B. Nzigamasabo, and C. Ruganirwa. 2016. [The Volunteer Farmer-Trainer Extension Approach: A User Guide](#). Technical Manual. Nairobi: World Agroforestry Centre.

Further reading

- › [PIM Impact Story: Volunteer Farmer Trainers Change the Way We Think about Extension](#)