

AGRA Impact Series



Farmers credit Village-based Advisors (VBA) training for household economic transformation - Kenya

June 2021

To remind her of her life as a hawker, Susan Wangui still keeps a pair of shoes that she says used to be very ideal for the one thing she did almost daily in her business; take to her heels when county government officials appeared at the informal market.

Like her fellow hawkers dealing in second-hand clothes, household utensils or foodstuffs, she would lay out her wares on handy gunny sacks which were easy to roll up and run off, not wishing to be hit with hefty fines or spending a night in custody.

“I cannot believe I am the same person sitting in meetings with county staff,” says Susan, now a village-based advisor in Ngoliba Ward, Gatundu North Sub-county of Kiambu.

Susan is one of the 1,200 village-based advisors (VBAs) working with the Local Development Research Institute (LDRI) in the AGRA-funded programme that is complementing extension workers capacity to reach farmers in Kiambu and Embu counties.

Starting off three years ago as a small pilot project operating in six sub-counties in Kiambu, the programme is now in the entire county and has even spread to Embu County. It has been featured in the IFAD-funded [Rural Solutions](#).

[Portal](#), a web-based knowledge-sharing platform that collects rural development solutions that are innovative and that are solving specific problems for smallholder farmers under the South South Triangular Cooperation (SSTC) program.

LDRI is supporting the county governments to identify and train the VBAs, as a strategy for shoring up government agricultural extension and advisory services. It is through that initiative that Susan was recruited.

“Despite the fact that hawking often involved run-ins between us traders and local officials, I had no alternative, and did not see enough from people in farming to convince me I could do farming full time,” says Susan, who used to make an average of Sh. 400 daily from her hawking business.

Narrating her experiences at a farmers’ field day held in Ngoliba on 14 June 2021, Susan said she has made enviable strides since she was first recruited as a VBA. After a number of training sessions, she says she now has 350 farmers under her, who she keeps updated with information on good agronomic practices.

Susan has progressed fast and is today one of the few VBAs who have become agro-dealers, with farmers purchasing various inputs from her.

With daily sales ranging from Sh. 3,000 to Sh. 7,000, her life is a big contrast to her hawking days. She has expanded her farming and is now also selling day-old chicks to the farmers in her group. She is also now able to pay for her children's education with little struggle.

For Susan, the best sign that her days of antagonism with county officials were behind her was when she was selected by the county as one of 50 VBAs to be trained by KCB/ MasterCard Foundation on financial literacy and how to access business loans as agro-dealers.

Though she was not one of the 21 who benefitted from the Sh. 31,000 loan to boost their businesses, Susan believes she will succeed the next time round.

Like Susan, Catherine Njeru credits her recruitment as a VBA in Kanyuambora location of Mbeere North Sub-county in Embu County for the recent transformation in her family.

The mother of three says the increase in yield from her four-acre maize farm since she started using the right seeds has helped her family to complete her house and to expand into pig farming.

From her work previously as a farmers' representative with the Kenya Cereal Enhancement Programme (KCEP), Catherine was recruited two years ago by the sub-county agricultural officer to join the VBA training programme.

She now has 300 farmers under her from two locations in the Ward, who she is reaching with information on suitable agronomic practices. LDRI has linked her with seed companies from whom she purchases seed for the farmers under her.

"Some cases of bad seed from some agro dealers had damaged the reputation of hybrid seed in this area, so initially it was difficult to convince many farmers to stop the use of recycled seed," says Catherine, adding that only after her first harvest did farmers notice the difference and begin taking her advice.

At a farmers' field day held at Kanyuambora on 16 June 2021, Catherine expressed her hope that the input companies working with the VBA programme will continue for a longer while to provide the demonstration packs, with some companies reported to be planning to stop the donations.

LDRI Project Coordinator Dr. Isabel Waiyaki says that LDRI has is currently working with 963 VBAs in Kiambu, who are reaching 183,000 farmers. In Embu, there are about 500 VBAs, reaching 58,000 farmers.



Winfred Wanjiru from Fadhili Africa, the local representatives of AgroCares, explains how the soil scanner works during a farmers' field day held at Kanyuambora in Embu County on 16 June 2021