

Sustainability

Farms in Sub-Saharan Africa tend to be small, with a majority under one hectare. Their small scale, combined with the great distance between them, has typically put three keys to success out of reach: input sellers, crop buyers, and national agricultural extension programs. AGRA's Village-Based Advisors (VBA) program strengthens farmers' connections with all three.

A recent evaluation examined the program's sustainability across Burkina Faso, Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania and Mozambique. This brief highlights key findings, including that while the program is unlikely to be fully sustainable as currently designed, the public and private sectors each offer a promising potential pathway towards sustainability.

VBA Evaluation Sources: 2022-2023

180 key stakeholder interviews, 35 focus groups with farmers, and 1,032 VBA phone survey respondents

Background

AGRA is an African-led institution that promotes agricultural transformation across Sub-Saharan Africa. With the ratio of agricultural extension agents to farmers in this region often exceeding 1 to 1,000, few opportunities exist for smallholder farmers to learn better agricultural techniques.

To address this, AGRA's VBA program recruits and trains tens of thousands of respected farmers in best farming practices. These VBAs pass knowledge to other farmers and serve as trusted problem solvers. VBAs are also encouraged to become agripreneurs,

connecting farmers with inputs and markets. AGRA and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation hired Mathematica to evaluate the program. This series of learning briefs explores key findings.

Findings

The VBA program has successfully expanded the reach of extension and advisory services for farmers. Strengthened support for farmers continues even three years after AGRA's financing ended, with 80% of VBA respondents reporting that they are still actively providing extension services.

The evaluation identified two potential pathways for improving the program's sustainability – specifically strengthening the program's ability to continue over the long-term without support from AGRA. Those pathways are through the private sector, with VBAs shifting into an agri-entrepreneurial role; and through the public sector, with VBAs being absorbed into national agricultural extension services. While both pathways are promising, neither pathway will support programmatic activities at optimal levels without continued financial support and/or modifications in program design.

The first pathway is occurring, to some extent, organically across all the countries. Leveraging the skills and contacts they acquire through the program, 20% of VBAs report becoming agro-dealers, agents of agro-dealers and seed companies, or agents of crop buyers. Many more aggregate farm produce and sell farm inputs. But that doesn't mean that farmer training has fallen by the wayside. In fact, some VBAs report that they are incentivized to continue farmer training as

it helps generate demand for the inputs (e.g., seeds and fertilizer) and services they sell.

This is a key feature of the program and offers a potential win-win-win. The private sector benefits from VBAs' networks in last mile communities. VBAs gain a new source of income from commissions. And farmers gain access to improved seeds, fertilizer, and information about agricultural best practices. At the same time, this model poses challenges to VBAs who must balance the needs of the farmers they serve with demands of their own farming operations.

The second pathway to improving sustainability is through formally recognizing VBAs and embedding them into existing public sector extension programs. Integrating VBAs into public extension programs should bolster the impact of those, often under-resourced, programs. Burkina Faso's Ministry of Agriculture is working towards this goal. It has formally adopted the VBA model and is incorporating it into the national extension system. The VBA program offers a unique advantage in insecure areas of Burkina Faso. VBAs, working in their own communities, can extend the reach of national extension agents who cannot safely travel in many areas of the country. Nigeria's national government and county-level officials in both Kenya and Tanzania are exploring incorporating the VBA program into their agricultural support programs or establishing a similar model.

Opportunities

Pathways to sustainability vary significantly by country. Much progress can be made by tailoring the program to the needs of each country's farmers. For example, countries with a gap in last-mile delivery but otherwise strong input and crop buyer markets, such as

Nigeria, may be good candidates for the private sector model.

However, this model would require a different cost structure, including shifting more resources to business development training and ensuring that the selection of VBAs considers entrepreneurial interests and skills.

The private sector pathway might also help attract more youth who are typically looking for income-generating opportunities. This pathway to sustainability is not without risk, including VBAs narrowing their focus to primarily profit-making opportunities and curtailing farmer training and advisory services. The public sector sustainability pathway, meanwhile, is more appropriate for countries with a robust public commitment to agricultural extension services yet limited extension reach.

Across all sustainability pathways, implementers should consider strengthening access to credit for VBAs and farmers and infrastructure to support the program, such as building local warehouses and collection centers which can aid aggregating farmers' produce.

Conclusion

Overall, VBAs have successfully expanded the reach of extension services and improved market linkages. However, the program, as currently designed, is not sustainable without continued financial support or program refinement.

To be
replaced by
AGRA

Scan this QR code with your phone's camera app to view the evaluation report and more learning briefs.