

Farmer Impact

AGRA's Village Based Advisor (VBA) program was designed to extend the reach and improve the quality of agricultural extension services and better connect farmers with markets and inputs. Bolstering these supports for farmers was expected to drive increases in farmers' yields – boosting income, profits, food security, resilience, and nutrition.

A recent evaluation examined the program's impact on farmers. This brief highlights key findings, including that the program had no measurable impact on farmers' yields, though participating farmers in two countries report increased income.

Farmer Evaluation Sources: 2023

6,777 farmers across 484 VBA and 369 non-VBA villages in Kenya, Mozambique and Nigeria

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 agri-preneurs, 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 evaluation found that the program's impact on VBA-supported farmers varied significantly by country. Generally, VBA-supported farmers have adopted some but not all the key agricultural practices targeted, such as planting in rows and using improved seeds. Farmers also report a modest increase in their use of inputs, such as herbicide and pesticide. But this was not enough to increase the average VBA-supported farmers' yields relative to non-VBA-supported farmers during the period studied.

Nevertheless, VBA-supported farmers in Mozambique report an increase in household cash income. This increase was driven by an expansion of the area farmers dedicate to VBA-supported crops and stronger links to markets, both supported by VBAs. On average, VBA-supported farmers in Mozambique earned nearly \$200 more from farm sales in the year of the survey than non-VBA farmers. While responses suggest a similar increase in Nigeria, it is not statistically significant.

Moreover, the evaluation found that farmers who engaged with VBAs at least three times a year experienced higher yields than those who engaged less frequently. This was most striking in Mozambique, where farmers with more frequent VBA interactions saw greater farm earnings, profits, and household income than those who engaged with VBAs less frequently. While there was little difference in the yields male and female VBA-supported farmers reported, women were more likely to keep, rather than sell, their crops. And when they did sell their crops, women farmers generally reported earning less money.

Differences of farmers with high VBA engagement compared to farmers with low VBA engagement

	Kenya	Moz.	Nigeria
Greater maize yields	▲	▲	^
Greater rice yields	^	▲	-
Greater soy yields	-	-	▲
Greater farm output value	^	▲	^
Greater farm profit value	^	▲	^
Greater household income	^	▲	^

Source: Mathematica farmer survey, 2023

Note: High engagement is 3+ visits by a VBA per year while low engagement is fewer than 3 visits per year

Key:

▲ Statistically significant difference

^ Difference, but not statistically significant

- no data

The study found no detectable impact on food security and an unexpected and small decline in dietary diversity.

Opportunities

There are a few potential pathways for growing the impact of the program.

Chief among these pathways is customizing the program to reflect local needs and conditions. For example, in a country like Mozambique, where farmers' connections to markets have traditionally been poor, hiring VBAs with entrepreneurial interest and skills could expand market opportunities.

Another potential lever for amplifying program impact is addressing lack of credit.

Currently, VBAs' lack of credit prevents them from stocking a wide selection of inputs from suppliers who usually demand payment up-front. While farmers' lack of credit curbs their purchases of inputs, reducing yields.

The impact outlined above may not adequately capture how the program shifted agricultural markets to better support farmers. For example, many input sellers now recognize small-scale farmers as potential customers and have expanded to VBA areas. Increasing the availability of improved seeds, fertilizer, and other inputs at lower prices may further strengthen uptake and increase impact.

Moreover, the impact outlined above may not capture increases in yields and income experienced during earlier years of the program. For example, farmers in Nigeria and Mozambique who report an increase in income often reinvest those funds in their farming operation. One hypothesis is that farmers invested their increased income from the program's early impact into expanding farming operations in the year of the survey. This may explain the increase in household income driven by expanded farming operations identified by the survey.

Lastly, improving access to information by leveraging digital technology may also offer opportunities to amplify impact.

Conclusion

While the VBA program increased support for participating farmers and improved their connections to markets, the program did not affect yields during the year of the survey. Nevertheless, the program appears to have increased farmer income in some countries, demonstrating how strengthening farmers' connections to markets can provide a robust pathway towards increasing farmers' income.

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by AGRA

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