

VBA Experience

Village based advisors face opportunities and challenges in their role serving farmers, from social and financial benefits to opportunity costs and business constraints.

A recent evaluation of AGRA's Village Based Advisors (VBA) program examined these benefits and challenges. This brief highlights key findings across Burkina Faso, Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania and Mozambique.

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 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

What benefits do VBAs gain? VBAs primarily report earning additional income from

improving their own harvests using practices taught by the program. Just over half of VBAs report earning income from selling inputs (e.g., seeds and fertilizer) to farmers and/or aggregating harvests for buyers, with more VBAs involved in input sales than aggregation in most countries. Some VBAs also report greater social standing and stronger leadership capabilities. Women, especially young women, are more likely to view improved harvests as the main benefit of being a VBA, while men, especially young men, are more likely to cite increased income.

What motivates VBAs? VBAs are motivated by serving their communities and helping their neighbors improve their farming practices. They are also motivated by earning higher income from increased agricultural productivity and, in some cases, from agribusiness activities.











What are the challenges of being a VBA?

Many VBAs report not having enough financial support for their VBA duties on top of their own farming and agribusiness activities. When it comes to inputs, despite progress, VBAs face unreliable availability. In some cases, input issues along with government subsidies demotivate farmers from using the improved seeds and farming practices offered by VBAs. Women VBAs face unique challenges such as long-standing social and cultural norms that limit them from working with men who aren't relatives.






VBAs face additional costs and trade-offs in their role, including:

- **Opportunity Costs:** providing farmer training and advice is time-intensive for VBAs and takes time away from their own

Top Challenges for VBAs by Country

	Burkina Faso	Nigeria	Kenya	Tanzania	Mozambique
1					
2					

Key

-  Insufficient transport
-  Lack of financial assistance
-  Business registration challenging
-  Insufficient training
-  Not enough income

Source: Mathematica VBA phone survey, 2022.

farms and agribusinesses. In some countries, VBAs that can afford to hire help are better able to meet their VBA duties

- **Business Costs:** Access to credit and startup capital is the main barrier for many VBAs to start or expand an agribusiness. Many report the lack of a guarantor or sufficient collateral as the reason they could not get a loan. In some countries, business licensing costs also hinder VBAs from opening input shops.
- **Transportation Costs:** Many VBAs pay out-of-pocket for transportation and fuel to reach dispersed farmers. They bear similar costs for input and aggregation activities.

What influences VBA success? Country conditions affect VBA success, including whether there is a clear unmet market need they can fill (i.e., little existing competition), whether there is local government extension support for and recognition of VBAs, and whether there is sufficient infrastructure, access to credit and stable prices. For example, pre-existing collection centers and warehouses enable VBAs in Mozambique to easily aggregate harvests from farmers. VBA use of agriculture-specific digital tools is still limited, but they do use other platforms like social media to communicate with farmers. VBAs' proximity to the communities they serve deepens their understanding of local issues and challenges, making them more effective

in serving farmers. VBAs with more years of experience are more likely to earn income from activities like aggregating crops—pointing to the importance of trust in establishing business relationships.

Opportunities

Country conditions greatly influence VBA success. Future programs should assess these conditions to adapt the VBA model to the local context. For example, if the goal is for VBAs to sustain viable agribusinesses, programs could offer access to credit and business start-up support. If the goal is more reliable income, programs should consider helping VBAs engage in a broader set of goods and services throughout the year.

Conclusion

VBAs earn income from improving their harvests as well as selling inputs to farmers and aggregating harvests. They are motivated by helping others but face trade-offs in their role. Future programs should be further tailored to the country-specific factors that influence VBA success.

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by AGRA

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