

## Systems-Level Changes

Village based advisors help bridge the last mile of delivery of agricultural goods and services to rural smallholders, such as selling them inputs like seeds and fertilizer and aggregating their crops for buyers. In doing so, VBAs extend the reach of public extension systems and private market systems.

***A recent evaluation of AGRA's Village Based Advisors (VBA) program looked at VBAs' interaction with these public and private systems and the program's impact on them.***

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 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 program has achieved the following private sector systems-level changes:***

- VBAs expanded input suppliers' market share and reach through connecting suppliers to farmers and increasing farmer demand.
- Some VBAs have made inputs more accessible to farmers by opening input shops closer to farmers in Tanzania and Mozambique.

Despite the input supply successes, high prices, lack of access to credit, and poor infrastructure continue to limit market transactions. For example, high prices make inputs less affordable for farmers, reduce the commission VBAs earn on sales and limit the volumes VBAs can purchase to sell. Government subsidies also reduce farmer interest in VBA-supplied inputs, complicating growth of the input market.

Output market connections have been less successful, with conditions varying greatly by country. In Kenya, for example, farmers are reluctant to sell in groups and, in Tanzania, they prefer to sell individually, reducing opportunities for aggregation and lucrative buyer connections. Across countries, a lack of access to credit hinders VBAs from purchasing high volumes of seeds from suppliers and aggregating high volumes of harvests. Price fluctuations also make it difficult to secure commitment from farmers to honor pre-arranged buying agreements.

Mozambique was the only country examined that had strong connections between VBAs/farmers and buyers. This is likely because of high integration between input suppliers and crop buyers as well as pre-existing warehouse infrastructure. VBAs also fill a niche that is not served by market actors.

### Success factors for strong market connections

Program Success Factors	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Establishing and maintaining trust between VBAs and market actors
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Selecting VBAs with an entrepreneurial mindset
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Providing business development support to VBAs
Country Success Factors	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Clear niche for VBAs to fill a market need that isn't already served (e.g., in places with few to no local agro-dealers)
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Sufficient infrastructure, like warehouses, and access to credit for VBAs
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Low and stable prices for inputs and high and predictable prices for harvests
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Pre-existing farmer groups or cooperatives

#### The program has achieved the following public systems-level changes:

- VBAs recognized as filling a critical gap in extension agents' reach
- Frequent instances of integration between the VBA model and extension programs, including extension agent participation in VBA oversight, training and selection
- VBA and extension agent relationships have continued even after the program
- Close collaboration enables extension agents to better understand farmers' challenges and they rely on VBAs for village-specific insights

Public extension professionals find the program complements their work and strongly support it, even advocating for formal inclusion of VBAs in nearly every country.

The relationship is mutually beneficial, with 83% of VBAs finding government extension agents helpful, such as providing them with technical expertise and guidance. However, local political changes can affect implementation and budgets, requiring continued advocacy to build consistent political commitment.

### Opportunities

**Private Sector.** Help VBAs establish viable businesses by providing startup capital and business development support.

**Public Sector.** Formalize relationships with government actors, such as extension agents, to scale and sustain the VBA model through adoption into national extension systems or official recognition of VBAs as partners. Invest in capacity strengthening of extension officials given their critical role in supporting and overseeing VBAs.

### Conclusion

The VBA program has expanded the reach of extension, with VBAs providing last-mile delivery of advice, inputs and services. Whether this is most effective through public systems or private sector markets depends on each country. VBAs need more support to establish and grow profitable ventures that connect farmers with input and output markets.

To be replaced by AGRA

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