

Peasant-farmer relays: feedback from experiences

Amandine Schlur (a.schlur@fert.fr),
Augustin Douillet, Ando Ravoninahitra,
Ibrahim Sana

PILOT FARMERS, peasant-farmer instructors, animal-health assistants, peasant-farmer relays—for nearly ten years, farmers belonging to FOs have been providing advisory services to their peers. Feedback from experiences in Burkina Faso, Kenya and Madagascar.

► Amandine Schlur is in charge of projects at FERT and leads a working group on agricultural advisory services with FERT technicians and partner FOs in sub-Saharan Africa.

► Ibrahim Sana is in charge of supporting cowpea FOs in Burkina Faso for FERT.

► Ando Ravoninahitra is coordinator of Cap Malagasy, an agricultural advisory organisation that belongs to the Fifata group in Madagascar.

► Augustin Douillet is a FERT technical advisor to the Cereal Growers Association in Kenya and to the Fifata group in Madagascar.

A peasant-farmer instructor leads a training session on cash flow in Narok County, Kenya

BELIEVING IN THE IMPORTANCE of agricultural advisory services guided by demand, farmers' organisations (FO) developed schemes in the 1990s that utilised salaried technicians. At a time when many local services were needed and funding had decreased, the emergence of peasant-farmer relays provided an interface between the umbrella FO and the grassroots groups they belong to.

Peasant-farmer relays combine indigenous knowledge and an understanding of techniques tested on their own farms. They are very persuasive and highly credible, as they cultivate close relationships with the grassroots groups. Unlike technicians, who come and go as available funding waxes and wanes, peasant-farmer relays are more resilient and provide a minimum level of service in all circumstances. They stand out because of their charisma, their level of technical expertise and their people skills. Chosen by their peers, they receive training in technical aspects and leadership.

Each organisation has its own way of operating.

Mandated by their groups, peasant-farmer relays take on a variety of missions. One peasant farmer in Madagascar says: "I work within a limited area. Everyone knows me. I perform the duties assigned to me by my group, even if it is not contractual, just verbal." In Burkina Faso, indigenous instructors provide training in agroecology. In Madagascar, peasant-farmer relays specialise in and provide services for which they are paid (vaccination of animals, sale of seeds, etc.). In Kenya, farmer trainers lead meetings to analyse technical and economic results.

They are motivated by opportunities in terms of access to innovations and capacity-building. They also have a desire to share their knowledge with their peers, which allows them to gain social recognition. For some, this status presents an opportunity to generate additional income, acquire small equipment and take on more responsibilities.

Some even spend more time outside their farm and are courted by others. "In Kenya, farmer trainers are approached by input companies... They are sometimes more interested in selling products than training their peers!" observes the Cereal Growers Association. This raises the question of conflicts of interest and motivation, between personal ambition and engagement with the community.

An additional link in the chain. At regional level, FOs must provide technical assistance, which is in high demand from peasant-farmer relays, to help them upgrade their skills. Peasant-farmer relays do not replace the FO's salaried advisors, but strengthen their action by increasing the number of farms monitored. But there is a great temptation to abandon paid advisors and use volunteer peasant-farmer relays instead. "There is a risk that the peasant-farmer relay will transform into a technician who no longer has time to look after his or her own field," says a manager at Fifata in Madagascar. But it's the duo of salaried advisor/peasant-farmer relay that produces high-quality advisory services and that allows for dissemination on a larger scale.

An inexpensive scheme. The peasant-farmer relay scheme is inexpensive. No remuneration is paid. Only an allowance for travel or to compensate for the farmer's absence from his or her farm is sometimes provided. What makes this type of advisory service original is that travel and meal costs are covered by the peasant-farmer relay or by his or her grassroots group, on a case-by-case basis outlined in those groups' rules of procedure. Depending on the case, those costs may be partially covered by the umbrella FO. The president of the Dablo cooperative in Burkina Faso says: "At our cooperative, each member makes a contribution in kind by giving two containers of cowpeas each year to the indigenous instructors." Another peasant farmer in Kenya says: "Yes, there are costs. But I am paid indirectly by the margins on the sale of products, for example."

Conscious of the challenges involved in sustaining those services, farmers and FOs appear to have found in the peasant-farmer relay an encouraging alternative that can be adapted to a wide range of contexts. It will be interesting in the future to assess the impact of these new advisory actors in greater detail. ■

