Young changemakers

Scaling agroecology using video in Africa and India

Paul Van Mele, Savitri Mohapatra, Laura Tabet and Blessings Flao
Access Agriculture is an international non-profit organisation that works across all developing countries to enable the South-South exchange of and access to quality farmer-to-farmer learning videos to promote agroecological principles and rural entrepreneurship. Access Agriculture builds capacity for the production of videos and, upon demand, translates any video hosted on its platform into any local language. It enables access to these videos for multiple stakeholders, including rural advisory services, education systems, media houses and farmer organisations. By improving access of youth, women, smallholder and marginalised farmers to relevant knowledge, Access Agriculture aims to contribute to more resilient food systems that can counter the changing climate and the erosion of our natural resources.

For more information on Access Agriculture, visit [www.accessagriculture.org](http://www.accessagriculture.org)

The issue of youth engagement in agriculture is a critical concern in both Africa and India. Traditional perceptions of agriculture as a low-status, unskilled occupation, coupled with limited access to resources and market opportunities, have contributed to a significant disinterest among young people in pursuing careers in agriculture.

In Africa, the rapidly growing youth population presents both a challenge and an opportunity for the agricultural sector. With the aging farming population, there is an urgent need to engage and empower young people to participate in agriculture and agribusiness. Similarly, in India, there is a need to inspire and educate the youth about the potential of agriculture as a viable and rewarding career option. Efforts to promote agroecology and sustainable farming practices can serve as a catalyst for engaging and inspiring young people to contribute to the transformation of food systems in both regions.

Addressing the issue of youth in agriculture requires comprehensive strategies that encompass education and training, access to finance and resources, mentorship and networking opportunities, as well as policies that create an enabling environment for youth participation and innovation in agriculture. By recognising and supporting the potential of rural youth in driving positive change in food systems, it is possible to build more resilient and sustainable agricultural systems in Africa and India.

Access Agriculture has been at the forefront of empowering rural youth to transform food systems through its innovative last-mile delivery model. From 2019 onwards, the organisation has empowered over 120 teams of young Entrepreneurs for Rural Access (ERAs) across 17 countries in Africa and India. These ERAs have been equipped with a solar-powered smart projector containing a vast video library, enabling them to serve as private extension service providers and facilitate the dissemination of knowledge on agroecological practices to farming communities. The ERAs have emerged as dynamic changemakers, demonstrating their commitment to promoting agroecology and sustainable agricultural practices to farming communities. The ERAs have been powered by the global energy crisis and the disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. However, these challenges have also served as catalysts, igniting the desire among farmers to embrace ecological farming practices and reduce reliance on expensive inputs.

The impact of the ERAs has been profound, as evidenced by the success stories shared in this book. From training child mothers in Uganda to become beekeepers, securing user rights for youth to access local forests in Malawi, setting up community-managed tree nurseries and addressing deforestation, establishing farmer cooperatives and promoting
organic vegetable production to creating demand for training and fodder production, the ERAs have demonstrated their ability to drive change and create new opportunities for sustainable agriculture. Their efforts have not only led to increased agricultural productivity but have also contributed to the preservation of local food culture and biodiversity.

One of the key strengths of the ERAs has been their ability to engage with diverse target audiences, including rural women, youth, and marginalised communities. By leveraging the power of video-mediated learning, the ERAs have been able to reach out to those with limited mobility and literacy, providing them with valuable knowledge and skills to enhance their livelihoods. The impact of their work extends beyond agricultural practices, encompassing areas such as education, health, and environmental conservation. Nonetheless, the journey of the ERAs has not been without its share of challenges. They have had to overcome scepticism and mistrust in rural communities, demonstrating their commitment to sharing knowledge and fostering positive change. Yet, their perseverance and dedication have earned them the respect and trust of local farmers, paving the way for meaningful engagement and collaboration.

As we celebrate the achievements of the ERAs, it is essential to recognise the critical role of hope, inspiring others to join hands in creating a more sustainable and equitable future for agriculture and rural communities. As we embark on this journey of transformation, let us continue to support and empower the next generation of changemakers, ensuring that their voices are heard, and their efforts are recognised and celebrated.

Together, we can unleash the power of rural youth to transform food systems and build a more sustainable and resilient future for all.

Pierre Ferrand
Agriculture Officer (Agroecology & Ecosystem Services)
Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)
Championing value addition
and innovation

“I grew up with my aunt in Koutago in the commune of Savalou, in central Benin, where most people are into farming. Our school was surrounded by fields. I often helped my aunt and grandparents grow maize, cotton, groundnuts, voandzou (Bambara groundnut), chilli peppers, yams and cassava. To help reduce the hardship associated with farming, I decided to study agronomy,” says Mahutondji Cédric Agbessi.

Cédric graduated in agronomy in 2016 from the University of Agriculture in Kétou (now the National University of Agriculture), and in 2017 set up his own farm and the “Agro Pour Tout” cooperative in Covè, in partnership with other young people. Of the 21 members, 13 are women. Four are university graduates, while the rest are people from the village.

“We began to produce a variety of vegetables for the local market, but soon realised that we couldn’t sell produce that had the slightest blemish, so we were making a loss,” recalls Cédric. Fortunately, one of the members, Iyabo Angélique Gnonlonsa, had learnt to make organic soap during her university studies. The first artisanal cosmetics made by the group were cucumber and carrot soaps, to showcase how products that were rejected by the market could have a value.

Thanks to social media, Cédric heard about the Young Entrepreneur Challenge Fund organised by Access Agriculture, decided to apply, and was selected as one of the winning teams. Soon after receiving the smart projector in 2021, one of his friends in the commune of Djidja, called him to say that farmers needed help to improve their soil fertility and manage the fall armyworm on their maize.

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“The village was 32 km from the central town of Djidja, had no electricity, and the connecting road was in poor condition. It was an ideal first experience to test the smart projector with the farmers. We were impressed by the enthusiasm of the farmers, who watched the videos in their mother tongue Fon.”
its solar-powered battery,” Cédric says. After meeting the village chief in the evening, the team screened various videos in the open air, such as Killing fall army-worms naturally, Human urine as fertilizer and Reviving soils with mucuna. “We were impressed by the enthusiasm of the farmers, who watched the videos in their mother tongue Fon.” The team spent the night in the village and then put the farmers in touch with the local branch of the government agency for agricultural development, ATDA (Agence territoriale de développement Agricole), to enable them to access mucuna seeds.

Cédric and his colleagues set up the company Agriculture for Development (A4D) Consulting and created a Facebook page and electronic leaflets to promote the services of their company and indicate where they would be holding video sessions and on what dates. They also shared the flyers on their social media networks.

Their first paying customer was Technoserve, an international nonprofit that promotes business solutions to reduce poverty. “As part of its Beninbiz programme, which aims to strengthen and support local entrepreneurs, it wanted us to broadcast Access Agriculture’s training videos and provide training on processing and packaging of klui klui, a local groundnut snack. The training

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— Championing value addition and innovation
took place in Malanville and Kandi, in the north of the country, but we were prepared to go wherever people asked us. After trying out the technique shown in the video Making groundnut oil and snacks, the women were astonished to see that they were able to extract twice as much oil from the groundnuts while turning the paste into a snack,” Cédric says.

In addition to travel costs, they charge their customers between 30,000 francs CFA and 50,000 francs CFA per day (46-76 Euros) for video shows.

“Finding organisations willing to pay for our service is crucial, but it can be difficult as many of them have a fixed budget for training. And as Beninese farmers are used to receiving per diems when they attend training provided by projects, it will take time for them to pay for video extension services,” says Cédric. After each show, many farmers ask for copies of the videos. As most villages do not have internet connection, the team transfers the compressed video files to farmers’ mobiles using Bluetooth.

When he was starting out in the professional world, Cédric took part as a trainee facilitator in a Farmer Field School (FFS) project, where he learnt the importance of farmers experimenting. So, rather than telling farmers what to do after each video, he simply invites them to try out what they have learnt in the video on a 20 square metre plot of their field and compare the results with their own practices.

“The Access Agriculture videos also inspired us. We started to produce our own organic fertiliser and made our farm fully organic. The cooperative was already making soap, but now it’s organic soap. The smart projector also contained videos on food processing, such as Tomato concentrate and juice, which gave us another idea, as tomatoes only have a short shelf life. We now make organic tomato concentrate, which we sell at a good price on the local market once the fresh tomato season is over. As we don’t have enough tomatoes ourselves, we also train women from our village in organic production and buy tomatoes from them,” says Cédric.

As a true entrepreneur, and to target international markets too, in 2021 Cédric co-created with Iyabo Angélique Gonlonsa another
company, called Agro Fenix, offering dried chillies, tomato concentrate and a range of organic cosmetics made from farm crops.

The team trained around 1,500 people in Zè, Covè, Kétou, Malanville, Kandi, Savalou, Glazoué and Bohicon. About 32% were women and 75% were youth. Each year, they have earned between 150,000 and 300,000 francs CFA (230-460 Euros) from video screenings.

Asked how he sees the team contributing to national food security, an early dream of Cédric, he says: “We want to influence policymakers to adopt this video-based extension approach and integrate the smart projector into the national extension system.”

To new ERAs Cédric gives the following advice: “Try to find an experienced entrepreneur to mentor you. Learn from your mistakes and keep learning, because the world is constantly changing and new challenges are constantly arising. Having the strength and being able to rise to challenges all the time is what defines an entrepreneur.”

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