Young changemakers

Scaling agroecology using video in Africa and India

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About Access Agriculture

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

Foreword

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 marked by challenges, including 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 played by Access Agriculture in supporting and nurturing these young leaders. The organisation’s coaching and support have been instrumental in equipping the ERAs with the skills and resources needed to succeed in their endeavours. The video library provided by Access Agriculture has not only served as a valuable knowledge resource but has also inspired the ERAs to think creatively and innovate in their approach to promoting agroecology.

In conclusion, the stories of the ERAs stand as a testament to the potential of rural youth to drive meaningful change in agriculture and food systems. Their dedication, resilience, and innovative spirit serve as a beacon 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. (3)

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Meeting the need for healthy school meals

Clémence Assongba holds a Master’s degree in agriculture from the University of Parakou majoring in natural resource management. “I have always loved to be in nature. I do not like cities, and really love to spend as much time as possible with rural people. Through my work as a trainer, I also feel I can contribute to food security in my country,” Clémence says.

Having grown up in a village in Ouéssè Commune, a major agricultural area in the Collines Department of central Benin, and her father being an agronomist, Clémence developed a passion for agriculture from an early age, and used to help her parents plant and harvest maize and cassava on their farm.

The government had procured cowpea, yellow peas and white beans from local farmers as the main ingredient of the meals offered to children at the school canteen, but the stock of pulses was attacked by weevils

Ouéssè is famous for its quality gari, a popular food in West Africa. Cassava roots are mashed, fermented and sieved into small pieces, which are then roasted to make a crispy, granular product. Gari processing offers employment to many women.

As a teenager, Clémence often joined women in her village when they were making gari. She quickly understood that to get steady clients you need to ensure quality in every step of the process. After
graduation, Clémence worked in several projects, training farmers on the use of organic fertilisers and nutrition. Having seen how widespread the use of agrochemicals is in her country, she is determined to promote agroecology as a way to secure safe and healthy food.

“In 2020, my friend Hilaire Kodjo informed me that Access Agriculture had launched a competition to identify young entrepreneurs who would like to become digitally equipped rural advisory service providers to support agroecological transformation, so we applied as a team. We went through the selection process and made it to the final. Access Agriculture trained us and equipped us with a solar-powered smart projector, but our enterprise got off to a slow start due to Covid,” recalls Clémence.

For several years, and with support of the World Food Programme (WFP), the Benin government has been committed to making school canteens an essential social safety net to improve access to primary education and increase the school retention rate. Food served to the school children is procured from local farmers, as such supporting local food production and culture. As an integrated approach, schools are used as an entry point for converging development initiatives such as education, nutrition, health, agriculture, and social mobilisation.

The video Making soya cheese enabled the 17 women members of Mahougnon cooperative to comply more effectively with hygiene rules

It was as part of the school canteen programme that Clémence was approached by the headmaster of Akuessa public primary school in the township of Abomey, in Zou department. With WFP support, the government had procured cowpea, yellow peas and

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Meeting the need for healthy school meals
white beans from local farmers as the main ingredient of the meals offered to children at the school canteen, but the stock of pulses was attacked by weevils.

“It was my first experience using the smart projector, so I did not charge anything. The school had invited the canteen management committee, including some teachers and parents, to a meeting to learn and discuss how to solve their problem with weevils. In the afternoon, after school was out, I screened one of the Access Agriculture videos, Storing cowpea seed, in which farmers from Ghana show and explain how they manage weevils by properly drying, selecting and storing cowpea. The video had been translated into the Fon language, which is primarily spoken in central and southern Benin, so all could easily follow. It was a fantastic experience. Afterwards, I learnt that the school had solved its problem, so I was really happy,” Clémence says.

To build up their experience and reputation, the team screened
videos for free to various women cooperatives, mostly on vegetable cultivation and food processing, but also on group formation.

So far, cooperatives have only covered their transport costs, with the exception of the Mahougnon cooperative, which paid 10,000 francs CFA on top (15 Euros). The video *Making soya cheese* enabled the 17 women members of Mahougnon cooperative in Saclo, in the municipality of Bohicon, to comply more effectively with hygiene rules. They improved the quality of their soya cheese and improved their business.

Clémence has also been renting out the smart projector to local NGOs who often want to screen their own videos. To ensure proper care of the smart projector, one of the team members always facilitates the sessions, at the rate of 50,000 francs CFA (76 Euros) per day.

To secure more paying contracts, Clémence wants to reach out to more NGOs and offer her services to schools and training centres. “I am currently exploring whether to register as a consultancy bureau or as an NGO, because when you approach potential clients as a simple individual, they do not seem to take you seriously,” says Clémence.

The first years of establishing a new enterprise are often the most difficult ones, which is why Access Agriculture coaches young entrepreneurs like Clémence, helping to improve their visibility, linkages with potential clients and negotiation skills. Access Agriculture also encourages new projects to include the video-based training services of the young entrepreneurs into their new proposals.