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

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 also become catalysts for positive change in their communities.

The stories captured in this book reflect the diverse backgrounds and experiences of the ERAs. From those who left school at a young age to university graduates, and from individuals with no prior agricultural experience to those already running small businesses, the ERAs represent a wide spectrum of young people who have been driven by a common goal – to make a meaningful impact in their home communities. Their journeys 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.

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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.

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Capitalizing on the growing demand for chemical-free food

“When I went to university, my friends asked me ‘Why don’t you study accounting instead of agriculture?’ But having grown up in a farming family and having seen many farmers struggle on a small piece of land, I was convinced that I had made the right choice and that I could help my country,” Mori Gouroubera says.

Since 2022, Mori holds a Doctorate of Philosophy (PhD) in Communication and Agricultural Extension from the University of Parakou, Benin, lectures at the same university, and runs a small firm called Africa Smart Development (ASD Consulting), that uses information and communication technologies (ICTs) to train smallholder farmers.

“After receiving the smart projector with its library of quality farmer training videos in local languages, I suddenly had a unique tool and a competitive advantage over other service providers,” recalls Mori.

In the beginning, Mori screened videos for free on onion cultivation and other vegetables to women groups in Koundé, Bassila and Djougou, in northern Benin. The videos were seen as something new, and farmers were excited to watch them in their local Bariba and Dendi languages.

His first paying contract was for a local non-governmental organisation called Canal Développement. “I was asked to train four farmers’ associations with whom the NGO worked on agroecological practices. Each training lasted two days, during which I mixed videos with other sessions.

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to sharpen their business skills. I charged 100,000 francs CFA (150 Euros) per farmer association.”

Mori always targets farmers’ associations that are well organised, never individual farmers. From one satisfied client came the next. Since 2020, the NGO Api Service Monde has become a steady client, usually requesting two training sessions with the smart projector per month. Because it is a long-term collaboration, they agreed on a modest price of 15,000 francs CFA (23 Euros) per session, plus travel expenses.

“I had a list with all NGOs working in my area, and I visited most of their offices to sell my services, but it was not easy at first. I really had to convince them and give evidence. Often, I also gave them a USB memory stick with a few videos on topics of interest to them and in the local language, so they could see for themselves how good and how practical the videos are,” says Mori.

Mori has also been frequently renting out the solar-powered smart projector to other development organisations, as many work in villages where there is no electricity. To ensure the projector is properly used, he trains the people who will use it beforehand. His minimum daily rate for this hire service is 30,000 francs CFA (46 Euros).

With more contracts coming in from a broadening pool of partners, and because Mori had to devote more time to his PhD research, Mori re-enforced his team in 2020 and 2021 with three other young professionals: Albert Kora, Houdou Seko Zakari and Ouneizath Touré. While the main revenues of ASD Consulting have come from other activities, such as conducting feasibility and impact studies and coaching micro-enterprises, the video services have generated an average annual revenue of 775,000 francs CFA (1,200 Euros).

ASD Consulting also distributes the farmer-learning videos to farmers by loading them on micro-SD cards, DVDs, preloaded phones and USB sticks. “Even now, whenever people ask us at the end of a show, we transfer the videos that we screened to the mobile phones of some farmers in the audience, who in turn share it with others. But whenever there are young people attending, I also show them the Access Agriculture video platform, as young people prefer to find and download themselves the videos of interest,” says Mori.

Triggering agroecological transformation is no mean feat in an economic landscape dominated by a single export crop that has shaped agricultural policies in favour of agrochemicals. Over the past few years, Benin has become Africa’s leading cotton producer.
While it used to export its raw cotton to Bangladesh, it now has its own textile industry. Given its economic importance, the government is disinclined to curb the intensive use of agrochemicals in the cotton sector, but things are gradually changing because of multiple pressures.

Cotton is the predominant crop in the Atacora, Donga and Alibori Departments, in northern Benin. Over the years, many farmers have seen their soil degrade because of the intensive use of chemical fertilisers and herbicides, and are keen to change their destructive practices. Just like in most developing countries, rigid control on the use of pesticides exists on paper only. Toxic pesticides allowed in cotton can be found in any agro-input shop and often end up being used on food crops. Pesticide poisoning is not uncommon in rural areas.

“Besides farmers, consumers are also becoming increasingly aware. While the international market for organically and ethically produced cotton is growing, local people are also increasingly looking for food that is produced without chemicals,” Mori says. “Some people can tell from the taste and texture of carrots, tomatoes and even yams that they have been grown with chemical fertilisers.”

Most farmers do not sell their vegetables directly on the market, but to middlemen. These traders have observed that, unlike organically grown products, non-organic food grown with chemical fertilisers spoils quickly, usually within a few days after harvest.

Therefore, traders are increasingly looking for farmers who grow their food organically.

With a rising demand for ecologically grown food and fibres, the demand for training is steadily increasing. “The smart projector and professionally crafted farmer-to-farmer learning videos help us to maintain high quality training when scaling up, but there is a need to have more videos translated into local languages,” Mori says.

When Mori and his colleagues trained women's associations in Banikoara, in the Alibori Department of Benin, at the heart of the most intensive cotton-growing region in Benin, on growing organic vegetables, their reaction was heartwarming. “When farmers tell me that the videos have made farming without chemicals really simple, I feel a great sense of fulfilment and pride,” Mori says.
André Adjoboto runs an agroecological vegetable farm called Agri Bio Services where he experiments with all possible technologies to manage pests, diseases and soil fertility without the use of agrochemicals. Inspired by the Access Agriculture videos *Making enriched biofertilizer* and *Making a vermicompost bed*, among others, André engages youth to produce organic fertiliser, using locally available ingredients. The organic vegetables are sold in Parakou.

Impacts of the Access Agriculture videos are very diverse and at times certain changes can go unnoticed for an outside observer. “Women in northern Benin tend to keep quiet at meetings from the moment there is a man, but after they have watched a farmer-to-farmer training video in their language, the discussions come automatically. They no longer think about those social restraints and speak their mind. It is wonderful to see that men and women can sit together and discuss issues of common interest,” Mori explains.

From 2019 to 2023, Mori and his team screened videos to over 4,400 people, of which 18% were youth and 42% were women. Preferred topics include intercropping and crop rotation with legumes, vegetable and soya bean cultivation and honey production.

As an experienced ERA, Mori is often invited by Access Agriculture to share his experience and expertise with new ERAs in Benin and other Francophone African countries. “I often tell new ERAs that they should not get discouraged when they search for clients. The dominating mindset of organisations is that anyone can train farmers; some may even think that you are just after their money. You need to convince them about the uniqueness of your service and how it impacts farmers. Give them examples, invite them to attend a video session, or do anything to change their mindset,” concludes Mori.

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