

# No “one-size-fits-all” in extension

Social and cultural factors need to be understood and respected when trying to get farmers to adopt new practices. One year on the job, extensionist Ismail Kimole observes with sharp eyes how critical this is, for projects to be able to sustain their gains. | Text Ismail S. Kimole

In the past year, I have been involved in training farmers’ groups about organic farming techniques, with KIOF (Kenya Institute for Organic Farming). Some factors stand out, which have contributed to the adoption of these techniques. For example, when farmers see success on other farms, they then become inspired to try it out for themselves. At KIOF, we therefore take farmers for exchange visits to farms where good organic techniques are already practised.

**Higher maize yields** A good example of this is found in the case of a group of women farmers

(the “Baraka group”) farming in Makuyu, in the district of Thika. Here, six neighbours of one of the members all changed their practices even without training. After last year’s rain failure in an area with average yearly rainfalls of 550 mm, these neighbours had noticed one of the Baraka group members harvesting maize in spite of the fact that there was a total crop failure on other farms. They could see that this successful farmer was practising a water-saving technique on her farm. In the next rainy season (April 2009), the neighbours did not even ask what she had done, but simply went ahead and dug holes in the way they had observed her doing from afar.

When the Baraka members realised this, they called the neighbours and taught them the practice. The farmers, who then also joined the group, managed to get some yields, low rainfall notwithstanding. In other areas where I have been able to set up demonstration gardens, adoption rates have been higher than where these plots do not exist. In other words, farmers want to first see an innovation working before they introduce it into their farms, due to fear of the unknown.

Personal experiences by some farmers help change perceptions in others. I was involved in a survey where we looked at rice straw utilisation options in a rice-growing scheme. Most farmers believed that the use of straw as compost or mulch attracted pests, diseases and rodents. But when one farmer explained how he was able to reduce input costs and grow rice at a higher density after using compost, others reconsidered their stance and also started composting their rice straw.

### One rooster per household

Another factor for group success is when farmers in a group also have something else in common – such as a “merry-go-round” as is the case with the Baraka group. All members contribute to this common fund, which then allows members to get access to a larger

seminar to the next, and rarely train others, much to the peril of the illiterate. Cultural beliefs can also contribute negatively to project implementation. I witnessed a project fail simply because the farmers were given roosters to upgrade their local chicken production. In this particular region, the tradition is that a rooster owned by the head of the family, is the only one allowed to crow in the household. As a result, 78 percent of the roosters were slaughtered before dawn of the first day, to avoid a curse. In Kenya, there are cultural groups who believe that an old man cannot be taught anything of importance by someone younger than himself. This means that you, as a young extensionist, can spend a whole week training farmers in such areas, but you won't be taken seriously by most of them. They will only attend the workshop to be eligible for training allowances, if available. These experiences stress the importance of using a participatory approach in projects to understand how farmers think. Some initiatives will be picked up and others rejected simply on the basis of cultural inclination. Also, it is important to be sure to focus on the right target group when seeking specific changes. For example, techniques which require heavy labour may only be picked up by young farmers. The old may be willing but energy may fail them, for example for practices such as double digging.



**Organic techniques such as composting, or making sunken beds to avoid erosion, were part of training workshops given by Ismail Kimole to farmers' groups in Kenya.** Photo: Asthon Mwatela.

sum, one at a time. The dropouts are few, if any, since they use money generated from vegetable sales from their demonstration garden to be able to buy chickens and goats. As a result, this group is vibrant.

It is important to be aware of location-specific social and cultural factors when seeking changes in farming practices. For example, illiteracy, which is rampant in rural Kenya, means that most training programmes are attended by the elites – who then jump from one

What these experiences show is that the opinions and cultural diversity of the farmer target group need to be well understood, as there are no one-size-fits-all solutions in extension. ■

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