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Women Extension Volunteers: An Extension Approach for Female Farmers

Miriam Hird-Younger, Engineers Without Borders, Canada,
and **Brent Simpson,** Michigan State University

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Executive Summary

This case study explores the Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) Ghana's women extension volunteer (WEV) model. The WEV model is a peer-to-peer extension approach that uses community-based female volunteers to increase agricultural information dissemination in rural northern Ghana. The model is part of a national volunteering flagship program of VSO Ghana, a non-governmental organization (NGO). It was initiated in 2009 as a joint effort with the Ministry of Food and Agriculture (MoFA). The case study is based on fieldwork performed from August through November 2012 in nine districts across the three northern regions of Ghana. The study specifically explores what the volunteer model has been able to achieve and in what ways it effectively increases extension services for female farmers. The primary benefits of the model are identified as strengthening farmer groups and enhancing the liaison between farmers and public sector extension agents and NGOs. The study also covers factors that can determine the sustainability of this model, such as recruitment, program development and support from MoFA. The study concludes that, although the volunteers perform some extension duties, they currently have limited abilities in providing technical agricultural information or introducing farmers to agricultural innovations or new technologies. As it stands, their role is complementary to that of public extension agents in that they can expand gender-specific extension services by liaising between service providers and women farmers in areas already being served and helping facilitate dissemination of information in their communities, but they cannot be expected to replace agricultural extension personnel.

Introduction

"Gender equality is crucial for agricultural development" (World Bank, 2008: 2). In Ghana, it is estimated that female farmers account for over 70 percent of total food production (Duncan, 2004: xvi). Supporting the success of female farmers is key to agricultural development, food security and the sustainable improvement of rural livelihoods. Currently, female farmers receive only a fraction of the inputs and support that their male counterparts receive (World Bank, 2008: 7). One of these inputs is extension services. Extension services include the support and information required to know about and adopt good agricultural practices.

A group of 15 women sit in a circle on benches under a mango tree. Two women are asking questions, leading the discussion and encouraging participation. The women talk about challenges and plans for their farms, problems in their families and the recent flooding of a nearby river. One of the women leading the discussion is the chairperson of the group. The other woman explains that a non-governmental organization (NGO) has come to the community and offered to provide the women with a shea butter processing machine; they will just need to build a structure for it. She leads them in a discussion of where they will build the structure, where they will get the materials and who will do the work. They are happy and excited about the news of the machine, which will help reduce the labor and time required to process shea butter. The second woman facilitated the relationship with the NGO and the introduction of a new technology. She is the group's woman extension volunteer.

Alice, the woman extension volunteer for this farmer group in the Bawku West District of the Upper East, helps the group to liaise with an NGO project offering a shea butter processing machine.

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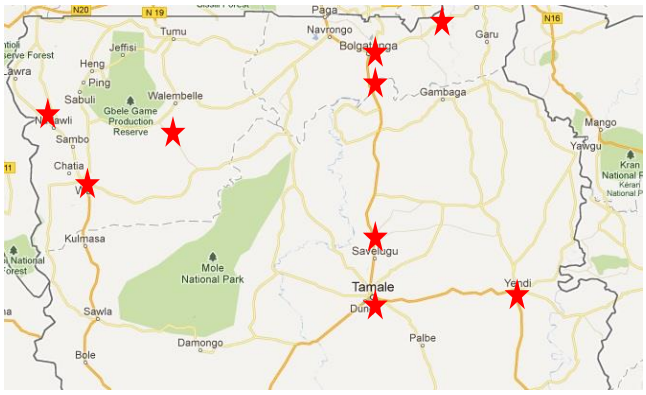
In Ghana, the public sector remains the primary provider of extension services. It is underfunded and lacks coordination, resulting in farming populations that are underserved. The current ratio of farmers to public sector extension agents is 1:2,500 (Duncan, 2004: 79). This ratio is inadequate for providing high quality extension services to all farmers.

Extension service providers continue to face challenges in effectively reaching female farmers and addressing gender-specific needs in extension (FAO, 1996). Worldwide, women have access to only 5 percent of extension services (FAO, no date). In Ghana, the estimate is even lower -- 4.3 percent (Duncan, 2004: 80). With women representing almost 50 percent of the agricultural labor force in Sub-Saharan Africa and 52 percent in Ghana, women's low access to extension services represents a significant gap that disadvantages female farmers (IFAD, 2011: 2; MoFA, 2010: 6). One challenge behind this imbalance is that sociocultural gender norms may make it difficult for male agricultural extension agents (AEAs) to interact with female farmers (FAO, 1996). In this study, many farmers and AEAs interviewed said that they felt it was inappropriate for a male AEA to visit an individual female farmer. However, they indicated that it is acceptable for male AEAs to interact with female farmers in groups and to interact one-on-one with a woman who has an official role. The difficulty of male AEAs interacting with individual female farmers is compounded by the severe shortage of female AEAs. In Ghana, it is estimated that only 10 percent of AEAs are women (Duncan, 2004: 81). Some of the districts included in this fieldwork had only one female field extension agent in the entire district.

In circumstances where sociocultural norms about gender leave women at a disadvantage, gender-specific strategies are required to ensure that women have access to the same level of inputs as male farmers.



Stars represent districts in the three northern regions of Ghana that participated in the field work. *(See footnote 1 for details.)*

In 2008, Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) Ghana partnered with the Ministry of Food and Agriculture (MoFA) of Ghana to address this disparity by developing and piloting the women extension volunteer (WEV) model, an approach to extension that strives to address female farmers' constraints and needs.

Methodology and Approach

This case study is based on fieldwork completed from August to November 2012. In total, 19 WEVs participated in the fieldwork: representatives from four farmer groups; one NGO representative; eight district, regional and national Women in Agricultural Development (WIAD) officers; five MoFA AEAs; and four district directors of agriculture (DDAs). Fieldwork was completed in nine districts across the three northern regions of Ghana where the WEV pilot was carried out.[1]

The fieldwork carried out included semi-structured and focus group interviews and open discussions with individuals. Field visits to farmer groups served by WEVs were completed in two of the districts. A one-week stay with a WEV facilitated participant observation and greater understanding of the volunteer's role in the community. Recognizing that the individual experiences, stories and contexts of each WEV are different, as is the diversity across districts and regions, the analysis attempts to identify the common themes and lessons learned across all volunteers that were contacted. Topics covered during the interviews included recruitment procedure, the activities carried out by volunteers, stories of successes and challenges, personal motivations and incentives, sustainability of the model, and indications of the types of impact achieved.

The VSO Ghana WEV Model

The WEV model was developed in collaboration between MoFA and VSO Ghana in 2008. The model is a flagship

[1] Districts that participated in the field work as well as number of participants per district include:

- National: 1 WIAD Deputy Director
- Northern Region: Yendi Municipal District (1 WEV, 1 DDA, 1 WIAD officer), Tamale Metropolitan District (4 WEVs, 1 WIAD officer, 1 AEA, 1 farmer group, 1 NGO representative), Savelugu-Nanton District (1 WEV, 1 DDA)
- Upper East Region: 1 Regional WIAD officer, Bolgatanga Metropolitan District (1 WEV), Talensi-Nabdan District (1 WEV, 1 farmer group), Bawku West District (3 WEVs, 1 DDA, 3 AEAs, 2 farmer groups)
- Upper West Region: 1 Regional WIAD officer, Wa Municipal District (4 WEVs, 1 WIAD officer, 1 AEA), Jirapa-Lambrussi District (4 WEVs, 1 DDA, 1 WIAD officer), Wa East District (0 WEVs, 1 WIAD officer)

Data from the field work is available upon request.

program of VSO Ghana and builds on the organization's expertise in establishing volunteer models for local and global impact. The WEV model has three main objectives: to improve women's access to extension services, to improve the capacity of MoFA to implement volunteer management systems and to provide a model for sustainable community-based extension systems. Funding for testing the WEV model was provided by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) through Cuso International, and by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID).

As indicated by the name, WEVs are female farmers who volunteer to offer basic extension services in the communities in which they live. Specifically, they work with farmer groups, offer on-demand extension services, and liaise between local farmer groups, MoFA and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The approach is designed to increase the reach and coverage of extension services at a low cost, with a focus on serving female farmers. The WEV model was established to supplement and complement the services of public sector extension agents.

Who are women extension volunteers?

The selection process of WEVs focused on identifying candidates with certain personal characteristics, such as:

- Female farmers
- Literate in English (oral and written communication)
- Married in the community
- Previous volunteer experience, e.g., leadership role in farmer groups
- Leader in the community
- Personable
- Innovative

What was the recruitment process?

- MoFA extension agents publicized the WEV role to women and farmer groups in their operational areas.
- In some cases, the volunteers were nominated by their communities, farmer groups or AEAs.
- Candidates submitted application forms and completed an interview.
- Selected candidates (between three and 12 per district) were given training and became WEVs.

The Ghana WEV pilot began in 2009. In total, VSO Ghana and MoFA recruited and trained 45 volunteers in 27 districts in the three northern regions of Ghana (Upper West, Upper East and Northern regions). The volunteers received training in basic technical agricultural best practices, sustainable land management, income-generating activities, health and sanitation, as well as gender relations, group management and leadership skills. VSO Ghana, MoFA and the National Volunteering Program ran the training jointly. Once trained, WEVs worked with farmer groups in their own community and, in some cases, one adjacent community. Volunteers were given a bicycle, boots and some writing materials by VSO to support their efforts. In the Upper West Region, they were also provided with a "talking book": a portable audio recorder containing messages provided by MoFA that WEVs could play for groups in communities where they worked.

The main role and responsibility of WEVs is to support community farmer groups. Volunteers attend regular group meetings and play a leadership role within the groups, possibly replacing a public sector AEA who may have played that role in the past. The WEVs offer training to their groups and to other farmers in their communities on the topics covered during their WEV training. As an extension strategy, the WEV pilot emphasizes a move toward farmer group formation and strengthening, especially as a means of increasing extension service provision to female farmers. The approach uses local farmers to animate these groups and, through the training provided, attempts to increase their effectiveness in serving as local leaders. The emphasis of the program is in working with female farmer groups and female farmers, although some of the WEVs work with mixed farmer groups and interact with male farmers in their communities. Beyond the general expectations that WEVs work with farmer groups and help farmers locally, and partner with the MoFA, specific performance expectations of the WEVs are unclear.

Part of VSO Ghana's objective in initiating the program was to support the establishment of community-based volunteers. To build MoFA's capacity to manage a volunteer system, MoFA representatives underwent VSO's training in their Volunteer Management System™ and Volunteer Programme Development and Management™. The management training was important because, ideally, WEVs are managed and actively supported by the WIAD officer located in the district MoFA office. The overall accountability for the WEVs' performance and activities was the responsibility of the district and regional WIAD officers.

The pilot was a three-year effort that ended in 2012. The initiative continues to have the support of local and national VSO Ghana and MoFA staff members. VSO Ghana is now looking to expand the program to more communities and regions in Ghana.

The WEV Model in Practice

Liaison with MoFA and NGOs

One of the main WEV roles identified through this research is facilitating access to extension services as a liaison. Through

the presence of a WEV, farmer groups and others within their communities have a greater awareness of where to go for agricultural information, as well as increased access to this information. For example, if a female farmer does not have the confidence or ability to go to a MoFA office herself or to call a male extension agent, she can still access available services through the local WEV.

Volunteers tend to have a strong relationship with the district MoFA office staff. As one MoFA DDA indicated, MoFA would not have selected the volunteers that they did if they did not trust them. The volunteers act as the first point of contact and principal liaison between MoFA and NGOs and the farmer groups with whom they work. To increase trust and communication with farmers, MoFA AEAs stated that they call on volunteers to attend any meetings or demonstrations that they organize in the community. One extension agent explained that farmers are more likely to adopt a new technology if the volunteer helps in its introduction to farmers. The increased rate of technology adoption is possibly due to the high trust relationship that WEVs have with other farmers, the fact that they themselves have adopted the technologies and their ability to communicate the information necessary for adoption in a way that is relevant to their peers. This aspect of WEVs being peers is particularly important for female farmers, who find it easier to interact with the female WEVs than with male AEAs. AEAs also perceive that the volunteer's presence helps female farmers to communicate more easily and freely than when the WEVs are not present. Thus, WEVs have increasingly become the main point of contact for MoFA in communities where they are present, particularly for female farmers.

This liaison role played by WEVs is also important for other service providers, including NGOs. Many volunteers indicated that if an NGO active in the district was looking to work with female farmers, the MoFA extension agent would first direct them to the local WEV. In fact, many times during the fieldwork, while sitting with a volunteer, she would receive a call from an AEA or a visit from an NGO project coordinator. The observed interactions between WEVs and NGOs seemed to be limited to NGO projects gaining access to local communities and not the provision of additional agricultural information or extension services.

NGOs and district MoFA staff members expressed appreciation for the role that extension volunteers play in supporting local agricultural activities. One NGO coordinator indicated that he relies on the volunteer for coordinating activities in her community. Volunteers are also active in supporting other local MoFA activities. For example, some volunteers collect rainfall data for their area. Others help organize events, such as National Farmers' Day celebrations. Volunteers expressed pride in performing these roles and even indicated that these roles are one of the reasons they value serving in the WEV position.

The additional support provided by WEVs to district-level initiatives helps increase the volunteer's recognition and status with MoFA and also helps to include the community, particularly female farmers, in sponsored activities.

Through this liaison role, the volunteer increases the visibility of local farmer groups and communication with extension service providers. Farmers benefit through increased access to the breadth of public sector extension services and greater connection to NGOs. The increased access to extension services, however, is limited to public sector extension and not agricultural information and services from other sources.

Women Extension Volunteers – Statistics *(Based on interviews with 19 WEVs across the three northern regions of Ghana)*	
Interaction with farmer groups	
Average number of groups per WEV	5
WEVs who indicated they helped strengthen their farmer groups	100%
WEV groups that work with one or more NGOs	84%
WEVs who indicated forming some groups after WEV training	55%
Relationship with MoFA	
WEVs who currently have a strong relationship with MoFA	84%
WEVs who do not work with MoFA	5%
WEVs who have attended MoFA meetings or trainings	67%
WEVs who would go to MoFA with agricultural questions	100%
Incentives and motivation	
WEVs who received one or more monetary allowance(s) in 2012 from MoFA	0%
WEVs who received non-monetary recognition (award, gift) in 2012 from MoFA	67%
WEVs who received recognition from MoFA (award, gift, allowance) since initiation as a WEV	100%
WEVs who received training since initial WEV training	56%

Primary Beneficiaries of the WEV Model

The focus of the WEV model is to supplement the MoFA extension services targeting female farmers. For their part, WEVs were highly aware that their work should focus on other women and expressed that it was a motivating factor for their work.

> *"When I see my fellow women in farming, I am proud and I say, wow, I have done something." Bintu, WEV, Tamale Metropolitan Agricultural District.*

The mandate of the volunteers, as laid out in their training, is to work within their own community and sometimes in one neighboring community. Therefore, the reach, of each individual WEV is limited. A minority of volunteers indicated that they meet with farmers outside of their mandated communities for specific occasions or meetings, but this is always in accompanying a MoFA AEA. Poor road infrastructure and lack of means of transportation also restrict the mobility of volunteers.

In addition to working with mostly female beneficiaries, WEVs also primarily work with farmer groups. The volunteers interviewed supported between two and 11 farmer groups each, ranging in size from around 15 to more than 50 members. These included both mixed and female-only groups. In addition, some of the volunteers indicated that non-group members come to them for advice because of their reputation in the community as extension volunteers, but this is generally not as regular as their interaction with target group members.

Overall, the WEV pilot was designed to supplement MoFA extension service delivery to women farmers. It is unclear, however, whether this intention relates to reaching female farmers currently not in contact with any extension service provider, or whether it means enhancing extension service delivery to female farmers that may have been overlooked by established approaches to extension. The difference is subtle, but it has important implications for MoFA's extension programming. First, the fieldwork determined that, in the majority of cases, farmer groups that the WEV worked with existed before the pilot was introduced, most likely formed by a MoFA AEA or an NGO at an earlier date. Of the WEVs interviewed, 55 percent indicated that they formed all or some of the farmer groups with which they work. Second, the AEAs interviewed indicated playing a central role in selecting the communities in which the volunteers were chosen and then in identifying the volunteers themselves. The MoFA DDAs and AEAs stated that they selected communities that they knew well and women within those communities that they thought would be successful volunteers. In some cases, extension agents lived within a short distance from the WEVs. The previous existence of farmer groups and the established relationship with MoFA extension service providers indicate that the farmers and communities involved in the WEV pilot already had access to extension services. The WEV model as employed in Ghana to date, therefore, does not necessarily reach farmers in communities that do not already have access to some form of extension services. The previous access to extension services does not, however, mean that these groups had ongoing relations with or access to extension, or that the extension services were addressing gender-specific needs.

Technical Agricultural Knowledge

The goal of the WEV model is not necessarily for the WEVs to provide agricultural information themselves or to replace AEAs but to help make information more accessible to rural farmers, especially women. The fact that WEVs are themselves farmers means that they have a basic understanding of local agricultural practices. The volunteers do not, however, have the educational background, technical training or access to new information required to provide up-to-date technical agricultural recommendations to fellow farmers. As part of the WEV pilot, they receive a one-time training on basic agricultural techniques. None of the volunteers had received formal agricultural education. Their broader academic knowledge of agricultural production is thus low compared with that of formally trained public sector extension agents.

All the volunteers who participated in the fieldwork indicated that farmers in their communities occasionally came to them with agricultural questions. Some also indicated that they visited local farms to provide advice on how to improve productivity. When asked what they would do if a farmer had a question that they could not answer, 100 percent of the volunteers said that they would contact their AEA to get the information required and then transfer the information to the farmer. All of the volunteers contacted during the fieldwork had the local MoFA AEA's phone number, and the majority are in regular contact with them. For example, a WEV in the Jirapa-Lambrussi district of the Upper West said that she had recently had a farmer come to her complaining that one of her sheep was dying. The WEV called her local extension agent, who then referred her to the district veterinarian, who, when contacted, came and treated the farmer's sheep. The WEV herself did not have the information on how to treat the animal but did have connection with the AEA, who was able to provide the needed information. The fieldwork showed that this role of the WEVs -- serving as a liaison between farmers and extension service providers such as MoFA AEAs -- was common.

Taking the liaison role one step further, in the Upper West Region, MoFA has initiated use of a tool called the "talking book" with the WEVs to provide them with technical agricultural information that they can pass on to farmers. The talking book is a portable audio recording device on which MoFA staff members record quarterly technical messages for farmers. The WEV then plays the recordings in her community. The approach has been successful in that region, although the cost of replacing batteries has been a challenge.

Strengthening Farmer Groups

Farmer groups provide an important platform for female farmers to learn and receive support from one another by discussing issues, challenges and opportunities (Swanson,

2008: 13). Forming and working with farmer groups are important extension approaches to improving female farmers' livelihoods. The WEV model is structured so that volunteers primarily work with farmer groups. During this fieldwork, one of the oft-cited benefits of the model was the volunteer's capacity to strengthen the local groups with which they work.

In total, 100 percent of volunteers indicated that the farmer groups they worked with had become stronger as a result of their efforts through the WEV pilot. Many volunteers indicated that their groups had started a group-level loan system, opened bank accounts and accessed formal loans since their involvement in the WEV program. In Ghana, group strength is often judged, both formally and informally, by the group's ability to access financial services and the formation of group-level loan systems.

Several factors contribute to the strengthening of these groups. First, the volunteer's presence and assistance strengthen group cohesion with improved leadership. As part of their training, volunteers received instruction on aspects of group management and leadership. In working with their groups, volunteers promote group meetings and instill a sense of group accountability through reporting on group progress to the MoFA district office. Volunteers offer assistance and motivation that can strengthen group activities through the provision of information on good agricultural practices. For example, WEVs received training on income-generating activities such as soap making, kebab preparation and other activities, which the WEVs can then train and support their groups in adopting. Volunteers also increase group access to projects and support from structures such as MoFA and NGOs.

Sustainability of the WEV Model

Three years after the WEV model was initiated, the majority of the volunteers that participated in the fieldwork were still actively working with their groups. There was, however, diversity in their level of engagement. A small number of volunteers (located in three out of nine districts) were identified that were no longer filling their positions. In these cases, the volunteers had either moved out of the community or had found formal employment. The following section analyzes some of the factors contributing to sustainability of the WEV model, as well as the varying levels of engagement of the volunteers.

A women's farmer group in the Bawku West district of the Upper East had recently received information that an NGO was sending them a shea butter processing machine. The group's volunteer, Alice, indicated that her group was identified by the NGO because of her presence and her strong relationship with MoFA.

Azare, a woman extension volunteer from the Bolgatanga Municipal District of the Upper East, explained that three of the six groups she works with had collapsed prior to her training as a volunteer. After the training, she took a leadership role and worked with them to develop a plan and goals. They are now meeting regularly and also have access to loans. In fact, one of these groups recently won the district award for best farmer group.

Bintu, in the Tamale Metropolitan District of the Northern Region, played an important role in finding a market for her group's maize production. She facilitated the group's relationship with a local buyer of maize, and the group now has a reliable market.

Incentives and Motivation

At its core, the model is based on unpaid volunteerism. It is thus important to understand the incentives and motivation of volunteers serving in these roles. Although the volunteers do not receive any regular salary, occasionally some volunteers receive recognition from the local MoFA district, such as a small payment (or allowance), an award or a gift, such as soap. This type of recognition, however, was not the case in every district. None of the volunteers interviewed claimed to have received regular monetary compensation, while 67 percent had received some other form of recognition over the past year. At least once during their time as a volunteer, 100 percent of volunteers reported receiving some form of recognition (gift or award). No volunteer mentioned receiving money or another form of payment or recognition from sources outside MoFA. The primary determining factor in the differences between districts' formal recognition of WEVs was the motivation, interest and priorities of the district WIAD officer and the DDA. In cases where recognition of some kind was provided, the WIAD officer and the DDA tended to be supportive and engaged in enhancing the work and impact of WEVs.

In some districts, the best WEV received an award, presented during the National Farmers' Day celebrations. Presentation of the award increases the recognition of female farmers and the role they play in local development. As the World Bank argues, making "the contribution of women visible at every opportunity, in multiple ways" is important for increasing gender equality in agriculture (2008: 317).

Other non-monetary incentives also play an important role in the sustainability of the WEV model. In particular, the spirit of volunteerism and altruism of the WEVs were important determinants of volunteers' activity. Those volunteers that were identified as being highly active tended to be those who

believed strongly in their contribution to their communities and local development.

> *I want "to throw the suffering away…to stand properly." Azare, a WEV in Upper East Region in reference to how she wants to help her community.*

Some of the incentives cited by WEVs during the fieldwork were ability to improve their communities, social status, social mobility, greater connection to MoFA and other organizations, enhanced confidence and pride, improved English, and training in agriculture and other subjects. Volunteers emphasized their feelings of personal growth, confidence and empowerment coming from the increased knowledge and social mobility they felt as WEVs. Many volunteers reported increased social status and mobility through participating in multiple farmer groups, having a formal community role, and having the opportunity to visit farmers and attend trainings.

> *"I changed my life," Elizabeth, Upper West Region, in reference to the empowerment she has felt as a WEV. She identified her personal growth as including improved skills in English communication, more leadership in the community, greater participation in farmer groups and improved personal relationships.*

One aspect of the model underlying some of the stated feeling of personal growth is the provision of an official title to participants, namely "woman extension volunteer." This formal title helps to increase the local recognition of the position, bolstering the volunteer's social status and prestige within the community as well as her sense of accountability to MoFA for her performance. This observation is consistent with other studies that have shown that providing a title to farmers in peer-to-peer extension programs helps to increase their recognition in the community and their willingness to provide information to other farmers and to assume leadership roles (Swanson, 2008: 35).

Despite the importance of these non-remunerative benefits, almost all WEVs in this study indicated a desire for financial compensation or further training opportunities. It is not clear at what level of effort the lack of compensation would cause a WEV to cease working; this would likely vary because this is a personal decision.

Recruitment and Hiring

Recruitment was identified as a key element affecting the model's sustainability. The program sought to recruit women with previous involvement in farmer groups and past volunteer positions because this was thought to reflect the candidates' altruistic motivation and potential to commit to a volunteer position. Married candidates were also preferred as an indication of long-term commitment as a volunteer; unmarried young women are more likely to move from the community if they marry.

After the initial recruitment, no mechanisms existed within the pilot to replace WEVs who moved on or to address WEV non-performance. If a volunteer was no longer able to perform her duties, the position simply was not filled. In theory, the WIAD officer at the district office would have the authority to fill vacant posts, as well as address unmet expectations in WEVs performance, but no formal procedures for this were laid out in the pilot, and this study did not identify any cases of disciplinary or similar action being taken.

Ongoing Training

Training was one of the principal benefits that volunteers identified as coming from their involvement in the pilot. That said, over the course of the three-year pilot, the majority of volunteers (44 percent) had not received any additional training after their initial recruitment, a minority had attended additional trainings at the local MoFA district office, and some had attended training workshops offered by an NGO. Both MoFA staff members and WEVs indicated that access to ongoing training opportunities would give the volunteers increased motivation and enhance their capacity to provide relevant and up-to-date information to farmers.

Support and Accountability

In the context of the WEV pilot, accountability is understood to be the mechanism for ensuring a minimum standard of services provided by the WEVs, including the support given to WEVs in carrying out their tasks. In the WEV model, assessing WEVs' performance and providing support for volunteers' activities was the responsibility of the district WIAD officer, who then reported to the regional WIAD officer and on to the national WIAD office. The fieldwork revealed a significant variance in the consistency and quality in the level of accountability and support provided to the WEVs across districts visited.

The principal mechanisms for monitoring WEV performance are monthly written reports and informal check-ins. A written reporting scheme was put in place for the WEVs, but this reporting was consistently completed in only one of the nine districts included in this fieldwork. WEVs and district staff members cited the cost of communication and transportation, lack of reporting materials and lack of incentives for regular reporting as the main factors contributing to the low level of regular reporting. Literacy issues were not raised as a challenge in reporting because most recruitment focused on candidates that were able to read and write in English.

The use of other, more informal forms of reporting varied across districts and included attending staff meetings and check-ins with district staff members and AEAs. The inclusion

of WEVs in district activities was observed to be effective in that it provided an opportunity for district staff members to check in on the volunteers' activities and performance and for the volunteer to access support, advice and further information in support of her work. A total of 67 percent of the volunteers had attended a district staff meeting or training at a MoFA district at least once during the pilot phase, but only three of nine districts regularly invited the volunteers to attend meetings and trainings. The leadership, buy-in and support of the DDA and WIAD officer were crucial in determining volunteers' level of participation in district activities.

Accountability between the WEVs and the communities where they worked was not observed. There were no formal mechanisms for farmers to provide feedback to the WEVs, MoFA or VSO Ghana on the WEV model or individual volunteers' performance. It is assumed that some informal accountability exists in the form of social pressure at the community level on the WEVs to perform their duties.

Bintu (far left), a WEV from the Tamale Metropolitan District of the northern region of Ghana, with one of her farmer groups.

Project or Program?

The WEV pilot was introduced to volunteers as a three-year commitment. Regional and national MoFA and VSO Ghana staff members, however, perceive the initiative to be a permanent program and part of MoFA's district-level activities. Most of the volunteers in this study commented that, now that the pilot was over, they were unsure whether their work should continue. Some of the volunteers expressed that they were less active in the past year because of their perception of the ending of the pilot and lack of support. Most volunteers indicated that they would continue to work indefinitely but currently seemed unsure of their formal status. Since the ending of the pilot phase, neither MoFA nor VSO Ghana has followed up with WEVs to discuss the future of their work or to provide feedback and support for them to continue in their roles.

Another source of confusion is that volunteers were told that the WEV pilot was a MoFA program, not a time-bound VSO Ghana project. However, the presence of VSO Ghana staff members during recruitment and training and the VSO logo on T-shirts the volunteers received reinforced the perception of the pilot effort being an NGO project. Moreover, some district and regional staff members, including DDAs and AEAs, were also unclear about whether the pilot would be continued. The lack of clarity and poor communication over the continuation of the WEV programs has implications for the continuity of volunteer engagement and performance, as well as long-term sustainability of the model.

Lessons Learned and Recommendations

The WEV experience offers a number of important lessons on the potentials and pitfalls of piloting and scaling-up a volunteer extension model in addressing the needs of female farmers.

Lessons Learned

Benefits to female farmers: The WEV model has been an effective approach for addressing some of the constraints that female farmers face in accessing extension services in northern Ghana, such as low number of female AEAs, lack of gender-specific extension programming and limited personal mobility (physical and social) to seek out information. The pilot was successful in strengthening female farmer groups and placing women volunteers in a formal role (WEVs) within the dominant national extension program. In their roles, the WEVs facilitated communications and connections between female farmers and extension services providers, and the WEV model helped to establish a sanctioned foundation through which female farmers could contribute to strengthening their own access to extension services. The fact that the WEV volunteers are based in the communities where they work and are known and assumedly trusted by the community members they serve means that they are able to act as effective liaisons between local interests and external resources.

Supplementing public extension services: One of the primary objectives underlying testing of the WEV model is its ability to supplement MoFA extension services in reaching women farmers. On the one hand, this objective has been achieved through the pilot in the sense that WEVs, by acting as community-level liaisons, have increased the access to extension information and services among women farmers, who have traditionally been underserved. On the other hand, the WEV model has not had impact to date in truly extending the geographic reach of the formal extension system into areas where it is not already active. One reason for this is that the process used in recruiting WEVs focused on communities where AEAs are already working and the identification of individuals that they felt would perform well as volunteers. The WEV model, as implemented, has also

had limited impact in expanding the reach of formal extension services. The model prepares volunteers to serve primarily as liaisons between local groups and formal extension services, and less so to serve as independent local sources of technical agricultural information or advisors. The WEVs recruited have no formal agricultural training and are provided with only limited information and technical backstopping to facilitate their work with farmers. The WEVs thus function primarily as a conduit in connecting farmer groups with external sources of information, and only secondarily in disseminating information directly to farmers. The WEV model requires the presence of effective extension programming to inject new information and services.

Strengthening local capacities: Through their leadership, organizational skills and relationship with MoFA and NGOs, WEV volunteers are able to increase the regularity of farmer group meetings, support group growth and diversify their activities. The existence and functioning of local groups is an important precondition to accessing and taking advantage of many opportunities made available by extension service providers and projects. Thus the efforts of the WEVs in strengthening local organizations serve a catalyzing function in their communities.

WEV model in a pluralistic extension context: As extension services diversify and become increasingly pluralistic in Ghana, there will be a growing need and increased opportunities for WEVs to serve as the initial point of contact and in mediating between a variety of extension providers and local groups. As indicated through the pilot, WEVs can provide local farmers with an increasingly diverse range of agricultural information as their network of contacts also broadens.

Importance of management: As designed, the roles played by the WIAD officers and DDAs within the WEV model in providing encouragement, incentives and support to volunteers are crucial to the model's effectiveness and sustainability. Put somewhat differently, the extent to which volunteers are actively integrated into the overall extension strategy and extension programming will largely determine the contributions that they make in improving the amount and quality of services that reach women farmers. Investments will also need to be made in training MoFA field staff in how to work effectively with WEVs in their day-to-day Activities.

Potential pitfalls of a volunteer model: As is often the case, a program's greatest strength often defines a source of weakness. Such is the case of relying too heavily on volunteerism in connecting farmers to extension service providers. It is possible, for example, that by establishing and becoming dependent on a layer of local volunteers, service providers will neglect investing more significantly in community-level engagement, thereby creating the potential of programmatic collapse if the free services provided by the volunteers disappear, as has happened in some contexts. Although it is beyond the scope of this study, it is interesting to consider whether the creation of volunteer positions for female farmers may actually increase the gender gap in service provision, with men accessing extension services through paid, mostly male AEAs and women going through a separate network of unpaid volunteers, and what the qualitative impacts of these separate pathways might be.

Recommendations

Increasing the reach of WEV model: The geographic reach of the WEV pilot is currently limited. To create change at a systemic level, with impact throughout entire districts or regions, the model needs to be significantly scaled up. Strategically, there are two alternatives -- volunteers can be identified in every (or nearly every) community, or the reach of a smaller number of volunteers capable of serving a larger area can be increased through enhanced transportation and communication support. Each approach has its strengths and weaknesses and will need to be assessed with regard to the availability of operational resources, human and financial.

Greater investments in WEV training: Transitioning from a pilot effort to an ongoing program will require an enhanced program for training new cohorts of WEVs, as well as in-service training to provide volunteers with updated skills and new technical information. Regular on-the-job training would help volunteers to play a more dynamic role in their communities and increase their capacity to provide farmers with relevant technical information and social organizational support. Training was also identified as one of the primary sources of motivation for WEVs. An increase in training opportunities, therefore, would likely serve to reinforce volunteers' level of engagement and solidify their commitment to serving in a voluntary role.

Increasing capacity to provide technical agricultural information: There is potential to increase WEVs' involvement in the direct communication of agricultural information. Drawing on lessons from the Upper West, where "talking books" were used to disseminate MoFA messages, expanded use of these devices and the introduction of other tools could provide WEVs with greater access to information, thereby increasing their capacity to serve as local sources of information for farmers and potentially even informal local agricultural advisors.

Peer-to-peer support structures for increased performance: There is potential to introduce the use of peer-based support structures to strengthen the WEV program. At the district level, informal peer support has already emerged among some volunteers, who communicate and share experiences with one another. The formalization of co-learning, coordination and active peer-to-peer support through the creation of WEV teams or pairings of volunteers could be a

mechanism for instilling a sense of solidarity among volunteers and a means of strengthening their individual performance.

Accountability structures and performance standards: As the WEV program grows, it will be critical that MoFA develops and uses a means of assessing and monitoring the performance of volunteers and those supporting the WEVs in their functions. At a minimum, a reporting mechanism that realistically considers WEVs' context, constraints and objectives should be introduced and consistently used. These reports should be oriented toward helping volunteers to improve their performance and holding them accountable to basic performance standards. In the same vein, the AEAs and WIAD officers who work with and support the WEVs should also be assessed on their performance and fulfillment of responsibilities in backstopping the WEVs in their areas. Greater attention should also be paid to developing and monitoring accountability between WEVs and the farmers in communities they serve.

Improving recruitment and human resource strengthening: In the WEV pilot, volunteers were recruited on the basis of perceived altruism and their likely permanence within their community. The assessment of permanence was linked with marital status and altruism with previous involvement in farmer groups. The expansion and sustainability of the program, however, may require finding other means of assessing altruistic motivation because not every community or potential volunteer will have pre-existing groups or a history of group-based activities. Use of a WEV mentoring strategy (peer-based or otherwise) and greater AEA support roles may be necessary to help the program grow into new areas.

Even with the most careful recruitment process, some degree of turnover due to changes in availability and poor performance is inevitable. Procedures to efficiently replace volunteers will be a factor in the long-term sustainability of WEV-type programs and will need to be linked with both performance monitoring and a system of training new volunteers.

Incentives must be reliable and sustainable: Understandably, the majority of the volunteers expressed a desire for regular monetary allowances. Whether perceived as compensation for their efforts or reimbursement for out-of-pocket expenditures, monetary or material, the provision of incentives in voluntary programs must be approached with care because they have the potential to undermine the program. At a minimum such incentives must be from a reliable source and sustainable over the life of the activity. Policies on the disbursement of incentives -- who receives them, for what purposes, how often and at what levels -- must also be transparent and understood by all involved. If allowances are not regular, they can have a negative effect on programs by incentivizing activities only when allowances are provided. The proposed use of incentives in a time-bound NGO project should be assessed for their permanence. The use of allowances in more permanent programs, such as implemented by MoFA or other district-level sources, should be assessed for their likely regularity. Such offices tend to be under- or intermittently resourced, often subject to changing district priorities. Other volunteer models have experimented with volunteers charging for some of the services rendered, allowing them to cover the costs of their work. For example, the farmer trainer approach in Kenya has seen some success in trainers charging for services, and this may offer a viable alternative in certain contexts (Kiptot and Franzel, 2012: 19).

Defining roles and responsibilities: Some uncertainty remains within MoFA in implementing the WEV model regarding the role of volunteers vis-à-vis the public sector system. Though there is general agreement that the WEVs complement the public sector efforts, it is less clear within the program whether the WEVs' role is to serve as a liaison with the MoFA program or to directly provide information to farmers, or both. The issue becomes decidedly more complex in a pluralistic extension environment involving contact with extension activities of donor and NGO projects that may have different expectations and provide different opportunities. Reaching clarity on this issue will be important in defining the various roles and responsibilities within an expanded WEV program and in determining what types of support volunteers require to ensure their success. Both issues have implications for and will need to be reflected in the program's accountability and monitoring system.

Clear communication within the WEV program: To ensure continuity and sustainability of volunteer efforts, the WEV program is in urgent need of clear communication about its current status and future as an ongoing MoFA program. In addition to those within the program, the WEVs and MoFA staff members, it is also critical that the existing women's groups being served and other extension service providers understand the intentions of MoFA in continuing to support and expand the WEV program. The greater the delay in clarifying the situation, the greater the prospects that the momentum created and significant gains achieved through the pilot will erode.

Conclusion

The WEV model piloted in northern Ghana offers an example of using a peer-to-peer extension strategy to facilitate female farmers' access to extension services. This model has proven to be a low-cost and potentially sustainable approach to increasing the extension services reaching women farmers. The model strengthens and complements a traditional group-based approach to extension service provision, strengthening farmer organizations with a catalyzing effect on their ability

to access other forms of extension services. The model, at a pilot scale, has worked well in Ghana, where WEVs have ready access to service providers and farmer group formation is strong, and may prove effective in similar and, potentially, other contexts. The operational costs of the initiative to date have been low but will likely increase with the needed addition of regular, enhanced systems of recruitment, pre- and in-service training, and monitoring. With improved and ongoing training and greater clarification of roles, types of support and accountability, the model has clear potential for increasing service delivery to rural communities and, particularly, to female farmers in contexts beyond Ghana's northern regions. Although WEVs cannot replace formal extension service providers, they are well-positioned to complement and enhance these services, particularly with the country's traditionally underserved population of women farmers. The approach enables women to contribute to local community development and to help empower their fellow farmers to access information and services capable of enhancing their livelihoods.

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Prepared by Miriam Hird-Younger, Engineers Without Borders, Canada, and Brent M. Simpson, Michigan State University

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