NURI

Danida

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Northern Uganda Resilience Initiative (NURI)

EXTENSION METHODOLOGIES:

Lessons in Farmer Outreach

Agric. Extension officer giving technical advice to group members

Northern Uganda Resilience Initiative (NURI) was a four-year programme (2019-2022) financed by Denmark's Ministry of Foreign Affairs as part of the Uganda country programme. A one-year extension in 2023 enabled the piloting of additional activities, focusing especially on greening and sustainability.

NURI aimed to enhance the resilience and equitable economic development of refugees and refugee-hosting communities in Northern Uganda.

NURI was implemented in 13 districts in Northern Uganda and focused on three areas: Climate Smart Agriculture (CSA), Rural Infrastructure (RI), and Water Resources Management (WRM). Approximately 30% of activities were in refugee settlements.

NURI used various extension approaches to reach farmers, including program staff, community members, or the farmers themselves, depending on the service required. NURI supported small-scale farmers comprising national and refugee farmer groups either separately or mixed. The extension services were trainings focused on climate-smart agricultural practices that incorporated the VSLA methodology and planning, and marketing. Due to a decline in funding for extension services, there is a need for participatory approaches and sustainable options. To this end, there is an increasing shift to farmer-led extension service delivery. This note aims to highlight lessons of interest to others implementing or planning to implement programmes including, or focusing on, agricultural extension activities. Detailed reports are available on www.nuri.ag.

NURI achievements, challenges, and lessons – which were gathered from implementing partners' reports, external assessments and learning and reflection workshops -- contribute to knowledge and learning on extension methodologies amongst other topics.

Nuri Extension Approaches

Climate-Smart Agriculture Extension – Employed Extension Staff

The main NURI project carried out extension activities centred on the agronomy of strategic crop enterprises. They used climate-smart technologies administered through hands-on practice in both method and result demonstration plots.

Agriculture Extension Officers (AEOs) were deployed to support skills transfer to households through groups spread out in all sub-counties. AEOs were full time staff of the programme, recruited based on a minimum qualification of a diploma in Agriculture or similar qualifications, as well as relevant experience. They received thorough training by NARO researchers and consultants and got refresher trainings throughout the project. AEOs were also facilitated with motorcycles and training materials as tools to work. Each AEO covered 10 to 15 farmer groups approved by sub-counties, advising on the establishment and management of demonstration plots for strategic crops, as well as providing extension training and individual household follow-up. The demonstration for Open Pollination varieties (OPVs) served as informal seed multiplication plots for group members. This increased adoption by the farmers who were trained. AEOs developed close ties with farmers during individual household visits and increased their trust. Additionally, AEOs were local staff and natives and they resided with farmers and community in remote areas.

The model provided an extension staff member to each group for two to three years and incorporated annual open-days and information dissemination via radio to the wider community. Agricultural Extension Supervisors (AES) who were also full-time program staff supported and mentored AEOs and approved weekly work plans. AEOs went through Trainings of Trainers (ToTs) and subsequently trained farmers on climate-smart agriculture, strategic crops, production planning, marketing, post-harvest handling and linkages between savings and loans and household/agricultural planning.

The endline survey of the NURI program showed that 93% of the households adopted at least three agronomic practices, which was attributed to the training methodologies and high level of engagement and contact hours with the farmers. Meanwhile, the cumulative percentage increase in average yields in kilograms per acre for strategic crops for participating households was 22%, and cumulative percentage of the quantity of strategic crops harvested that is sold increased by 14%.

The DLGs provided NURI with quality assurance of inputs through inspection at the source and/or delivery points. Furthermore, the program improved the capacity of DLG Production staff through career development and in turn, the DLG Production staff provided technical guidance to NURI field teams. Additionally, DLGs and LLGs conducted quarterly monitoring which provided a platform for NURI staff and DLG staff to share information.

VSLA – Contracted Community-Based-Trainers (CBTs)

Village Savings and Loans Associations became an integral part of the overall NURI extension approach early in the programme based on observation of the impact on group functionality and individual production. This is because farmer groups in VSLAs were meeting regularly, which improved functionality. Money saved was often derived from farming and money from VSLAs was used to support farming activities.

As such, VSLA and farming complemented each other. The training of farmer groups on VSLA was carried out by contracted CBTs, paid based on monthly delivery of training and reporting. Training included financial literacy and linkage activities while integrating household visioning. Each CBT covered an average of eight farmer groups depending on the distance and distribution of groups. CBTs were trained and supported through a team of NURI-employed VSLA Officers and VSLA Supervisors were responsible for the backstopping and quality assurance of the methodology. One VSLA Officer supervised 12 CBTs.

Community Based Trainer training the group members

VSLA and CSA integration in NURI:

CSA extension teams increasingly worked closely with the VSLA teams during the implementation of NURI as the motivational value of holistic household visioning and integration of agricultural production, savings and loans became clear. In CSA, farmer groups were trained to prepare three-year production and marketing plans with the set goals reviewed annually to track the achievement of their production goals.
Meanwhile, VSLA sessions on household planning which entailed setting of short-, medium- and long-term household goals and financial literacy, equipped households to focus their efforts on systematic realization of development goals into which production feeds. As such VSLA enabled households to finance production and to execute requisite farming activities in a timely manner. This led to better proceeds which in turn boosted their savings and investment capacity. The NURI programme capitalized on this reciprocal relationship to enhance the productivity and resilience of target households.

Testing of alternative extension approaches

Farmer Marketing Schools (FMS)

NURI carried out a two-year pilot on FMS, working with 181 CSA-trained farmer groups, based on the ADRA FMS training model. The ADRA FMS training model comprises of 14 sessions on mentoring farmers towards discovery learning on market prospects for their commodities. FMS integrates farmer-led market research where farmers explore markets by initiating and creating linkages with other value chain players. The initial training is supplemented by market visits. Two models were tested: (a) A cluster model where volunteer trainers from the group functioned as farmer-to-farmer volunteer trainers. This model was less popular. (b) A 'complementarity' model where individual groups were trained by NURI extension staff.

Farmer-to-Farmer Extension (F2FE)

During the NURI extension, an F2FE pilot based on volunteer trainers within the farmer groups was carried out. Here, one farmer per group was nominated by group members and trained by the NURI extension staff, who then cascaded the same training to their group members. This approach aimed at cutting extension costs, reaching many farmers and building local capacity. NURI termed them as Community Based Facilitators (CBFs).

Community Based Trainer training the group members

The topic of training was permaculture, targeting refugee women groups as well as mixed refugee/ host groups, and in one district, national farmer groups. A total of 870 groups participated for two seasons, receiving vegetable seeds, fruit tree seedlings and orange-flesh sweet potato vines. CBFs were mentored and trained by NURI extension staff and given refresher trainings throughout the two seasons. CBFs were volunteers selected by the group members.

Under the household tree growing pilot, NURI experimented the F2FE approach to cascade training on tree management from one farmer to another. F2FE is a farmer-centred training approach introduced in the tree growing pilot to promote participatory learning and practice in the management of trees among group members. It involved door-to-door hands-on demonstration of recommended tree growing practices cascaded by a few members of each group to fellow group members at respective households, with technical staff only backstopping in case of gaps. The F2FE approach was promising in terms of delivery of extension to farmers because the selected few participants who were mentored effectively delivered the same training to fellow farmers. This increased the outreach and pace of advisory service delivery to participant households.

LESSONS LEARNED

General lessons

Balance length and depth of coverage and cost effectiveness
The number of groups per trainer, the period of coverage per group, the frequency of ToTs, refresher training and mentoring visits to support extensionists need to be balanced against the costs of these activities. This seems to depend on each organisation and their views varied. NURI's experience also shows that two years of targeted extension using volunteer extensionists from 25 farmer groups, supported by well-trained extension staff, with minimum input provision and maximum contact time, was effective. Integrating radio talk shows can extend outreach.

Integrate financial services
Groups that save together, stay together; they build trust and positively impacting all group activities. Integration of Household visioning into production and savings/loan activities can lead to a positive cycle, impacting household joint investments.

Consider student and new graduate extensionists
NURI has had a good experience with new graduates as extension staff, and students as volunteer F2F extensionists. These youth have shown great commitment and enthusiasm and have been warmly embraced by their communities. As such, youth can be important champions in delivering extension services to farmers as they work with zeal.

Maintain a flexible organisational culture and innovation
Allowing extensionists some freedom to experiment and learn from mistakes has resulted in several innovations by both employed and volunteer extensionists. It is therefore recommended that some level of freedom be allowed for staff to learn and implement the lessons immediately.

Lessons on Programme employed extension team – NURI AEO/AES model

Integrate demonstration activities
Using demonstration gardens for hands-on learning and seed multiplication sites proved successful in enabling group members access to improved seeds for their own gardens. However, the seed multiplication aspect does not work for all crops. By going through the production cycle, the farmers acquire the necessary production skills.

Focus on the strategic crops
The selection of strategic crops, with each group having a range of options, has allowed the transfer of knowledge and skills on relevant and specific CSA and good agricultural practices. Practices have been transferred to other crops, and the option to change crops has been important for some groups.

Facilitate extensionists-farmer groups relationship
AEOs are field-based, which makes them easily accessible to the groups, enables good working relationships, and allows them to play multiple roles in the community.

Recruit and strengthen capacity of extension staff competitively
Competitive recruitment, providing clear deliverables, relevant, regular training and updating on technologies as well as mentoring and supervision of extension teams are necessary to ensure quality extension services.

Collaborate with research institutions
NURI used resource persons from National Agriculture Research Organisation (NARO), Makerere University and technical specialists in District Local Government to train its extension staff. They benefited from trainers with updated technologies and a wealth of knowledge. This approach provided real time information, dissemination opportunities, and the adoption of new practices and technologies.

Lessons on contracted Community Based Trainers (CBTs) (Lessons from contracting CBTs for VSLA implementation)

Contractual agreements affect performance
Although employing community-based trainers on a contractual basis gives some level of control, it still is not direct employment. There have been cases of CBTs taking on other employment opportunities that conflict with NURI tasks. Compared to volunteer community members, however, CBTs can be given more tasks such as data collection and monitoring.

Invest in capacity-building for CBTs
While contracted trainers are less stable than employed staff, they do cover several groups, many staying with the programme for several contract periods. Thus, investing in their capacity building is worthwhile. Most CBTs remain within the community after the end of the contract, and thus continue to benefit the community.

Lessons on Volunteer Farmer to Farmer Extensionists (F2FE)

Volunteers are a cost-effective and sustainable approach

The engagement of F2F extensionists is a cost-effective way to extend the outreach of extension provision, while contributing to sustainability. Community/farmer group involvement in the selection of F2F extensionists ensures buy-in and ownership. The active involvement of farmers in administering trainings to their peers enhances their adeptness of the knowledge/skills and sustained access to other community members.

Contact time and local knowledge vs technical knowledge

F2F extensionists have local knowledge, such as the optimal time for group interaction, and proficiency in local languages. However, they generally do not have the educational background to explain complex technical issues/ideas.

Create support systems for the empowerment of F2FE extensionists

To ensure the quality of the F2FE component and increase community trust, several considerations must be prioritized: A solid support system that empowers F2F extensionists, ensures quality training and builds community trust in the information provided is needed. This system includes relevant training materials and ongoing mentoring and relating/introducing the F2F extensionists to local the government systems. NURI also allowed some level of innovativeness of staff and groups under F2FE e.g., having joint nurseries as opposed to individual ones and the establishment of coordination structures for farmer extensionists in zones in the refugee settlements, etc.

Clearly define relationships with group leaders

The F2F extensionist role as it relates to group leaders needs to be clearly negotiated from the onset to avoid conflicts and overlapping roles.

The use of CBFs and their selection is recommended

The use of fellow farmers in the training was highly commended by the farmers who participated. Some field visits confirmed that the trainers did a very good job while in other instances, it was not done well. The selection of trainers is also very important as there were differences in training delivery. The spirit of voluntarism, desire to see changes in the community, personal acceptability in the community, representation of different ethnic groups if present and being trainable are all essential. Group membership was found to be high for the CBFs conducting household follow-up visits. In a few cases in Imvepi and Rhino Camp, student CBFs were selected and proved very effective in cascading permaculture knowledge to the farmer groups.

Use of mixed training methods

The training of CBFs and farmers was hands-on, supplemented by other methods such as plenary discussions, experience sharing, role plays, presentation, refresher training, exchange visits and breaking up into small groups. Due to the technical nature of the trainings, it was not always easy to understand every topic, so the use of different methods was helpful and appreciated by a cross-section of groups interviewed about the training approaches that NURI deployed.

Motivate CBFs

Some farmer groups motivated their CBFs in-kind e.g., offering produce from, labour at learning sites. NURI also gave transport and refreshments in cash form to CBFs during routine meetings and trainings, and this motivated them. Recognition of hardworking CBFs with certificates and going for exchange visits were other forms of motivation.

Conclusion:

F2FE pilot has been a success with great learning and is recommended for inclusion in future programs of Danida. It has generated a lot of enthusiasm from participating groups who have seen the results of it and pledged to continue with permaculture even without NURI, arising from the training they received. This approach was also introduced under the tree growing pilot to increase outreach among farmers and showed promise. The groups appreciated the capacity this approach leaves behind for them. The farmer trainers emerged as model farmers and this has inspired them and group members.

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