FARMBOOK SUITE: ICT FOR AGRIBUSINESS AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

For most farmers and many field agents, business development is a challenge. Most smallholder farmers do not keep records. Most field agents are trained in production, not business management, and lack the skills to help farmers to plan their enterprises. To enable farmers to analyze market opportunities and increase their income, more attention needs to be given to monitor the profits that different types of farmers gain from using new technologies and linking to markets.

The Farmbook Suite is a set of ICT tools designed to help agents to support farmer groups through improved training, business planning and market analysis, and GIS-linked service delivery tracking. It is part of the 5 Skills Set approach to integrated rural development. For more information see: http://www.crsprogramquality.org/five-skill-sets-for-farmers/

BUSINESS PLANNER

Designed for use by field agents, the namesake software in the Farmbook suite, the Farmbook Business Planner, was designed to enable farmers to develop customized business plans with details about their costs, revenues, sales and profits. The software calculates profits and generates reports that can be printed and shared directly with farmers, and collects comprehensive agricultural data on inputs, cropping calendars, labor, costs, financing plan and sales that can be integrated into the monitoring and evaluation process for an extension program.

5 SKILLSET E-LEARNING

In order to ensure consistent transfer of knowledge to extension officers, we've converted the guidebooks on the '5 Skills Set' into an e-learning program with 9 courses: Introduction, Group Management, SILC, NRM Process, NRM Basics, Marketing Basics, 7 Steps of Marketing and Innovation. In multi-year, multi-country projects this provides a way to train, monitor and support large cohorts of field agents and extension officers and to quickly train new officers in locations where staff turnover is high.

MAP AND TRACK

Recording the real time activities of field agents can help to improve the management of extension services and to provide incentives to ensure regular support and training for farmer groups. "Map & Track", is linked to the Farmbook Business Planner to pull farmer group registration data and database and allows field agents to record their activities in real time. The application uses Arc GIS to map service delivery. The application also enables team supervisors and managers to better link service delivery and training with beneficiary group performance and results. In future programs, service delivery will be directly linked to support payments to field agents, providing direct incentives for performance based-pay and reimbursement for travel and per diem.

THE BUSINESS PLANNER HAS SIX BASIC FUNCTIONS:

1. REGISTER PEOPLE INTO HOUSEHOLDS
2. REGISTER FARMERS INTO FARMER GROUPS
3. ENABLES FARMERS TO RUN PROFITABILITY ANALYSES FOR SPECIFIC PRODUCTS
4. ENABLES FARMER GROUPS TO DEVELOP A BUSINESS PLANS
5. SUPPORTS CROP PRODUCTION PLANNING
6. SUPPORTS LOCAL REPORTS AND SYNCHRONIZATION TO CLOUD BASED REPORTING

Extension officer Peter Mwangi sits down with the head of a farmer group in Nyeri, Kenya, to write a business plan. Photo by Suzanne Andrews/CRS

HOW FARMBOOK WORKS WITHIN A PROJECT

When a project is set up, basic data about the community is taken through baseline surveys that are now recorded using a mobile device with digital forms on iFormbuilder. Field agents then receive training both through workshops, complimented with distance learning products on the Agilix LMS BrainHoney platform (functional both on-line and off-line).

Farmbook is used by the field agents to register farmer groups, develop business plans and analyze income and expenses (profitability) through the cropping season.

The development team has also built a low cost Map & Track application to enable field agents to record their activities. Real time information on training, asset delivery, business development, crop yields, and farmer profits can be used to make corrective management decisions during the project.

Farmbook Suite applications are designed for use by field agents with easy access for reporting and progress tracking by managers. They are fully operational off-line, although connectivity is required to submit reports. The Business Planner is available in French, Hindi, Bangla, Serbian, Swahili, Spanish and Malagasy. The distance learning courses are currently being translated into French and Spanish.

BASELINE PROJECT START
Data collected to establish the farmer's baseline situation

E-LEARNING
Field agents are trained using e-learning modules on group formation, finance, marketing, natural resource management, and innovation. In turn they teach the farmers these skills.

ENDLINE
Repeat of baseline

MAP & TRACK
Monitoring tool enabling field agent to record services delivered to farmers

PRODUCT SALES
Records sales of group to market

FARMER REGISTRATION
Registers farmers into the Farmbook business planning process

BUSINESS PLAN
Field agent initiates business planning process with the farmer

CURRENT PROJECTS

Farmbook Suite is part of a comprehensive market integration project in Zambia, Zimbabwe, Madagascar, Malawi, and Farmbook is also being used in a soybean production to market project in Tanzania. It is also being piloted externally in a USDA-funded Serbian 4H young farmers program, and is adapted and marketed to local extension services by a private sector technology company in Bangladesh. The Farmbook Suite and 5 Skillset approach is being piloted by 30 extension officers working under the Kenya Ministry of Agriculture. The Ministry of Agriculture is in the process of rolling out a larger scale ICT initiative and is assessing the feasibility of integrating Farmbook ICT into their national extension program. University of Illinois, Modernizing Extension and Advisory Services (MEAS) Dr. Paul NcNamara and Dr. Joyous Tata are leading an impact evaluation to assess the impact of the Farmbook ICT and Five Skills Set training on farmer livelihoods.