

What is Farmbook?

Farmbook is a field based application that the CRS agriculture that is being developed and tested at the request of a consortium of NGO,s who work together as part of the Southern African Agro-Enterprise Learning Alliance¹. The purpose of the application is to enable field agents to help farmers plan their farm businesses more effectively and evaluate their productivity and profitability. The system was also developed as a means of helping to manage field agents, and support the needs of remote field agents being able to share their data with project managers.

Business focused information

Farmbook provides farmers with access to a business planning process, that is focused on their product and market opportunity. It provides customized business information, rather than general market information. For most farmers and many agricultural field agents business development is a challenge. Most smallholder farmers do not keep records. Most field agents have not received any formal education in business management and therefore rarely help farmers to plan their enterprises. The focus therefore remains on productivity enhancement. However, for development processes and upgrading strategies to work successfully in a business environment, more attention needs to be given to monitoring the profits that different types of farmers gain from using technologies and linking to markets.

The challenge of providing business services


For any business calculator to provide useful information it must first be integrated into a program that provides training in marketing and business evaluation. CRS has developed a series of guides that help field agents, learn these techniques. The work on marketing and business is provided through two training modules entitled, (i) marketing basics and (ii) the 7 steps of marketing. These guides provide an initial grounding in marketing principles and terminology and the process guide helps field agents to gain practical experience in identifying market opportunities with farmers, gathering information to prepare a business plan and then evaluating the success of the plan at the end of the season.

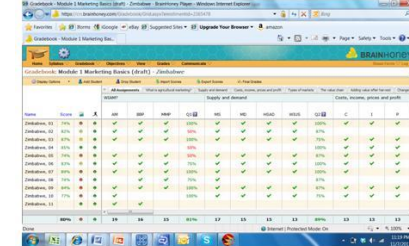
Distance learning in marketing basics

 **Distance Learning with Go Course**



Monitoring and coaching students

 **Monitoring Distance Learning**



Farmbook as a training tool

Once field agents have gained the basic knowledge about marketing and business planning, they can test their knowledge using Farmbook. CRS has developed case studies that field agents can use to gain a better understanding about the types of products that they will work on with farmers. Using the Farmbook to assemble the right information into a series of templates and using the profitability calculators to input key data and analyze results. Using market planning tools and the farmbook in

¹ Members of the South African Agro-enterprise learning Alliance, include:- CRS, ACDI/ VOCA, World Vision, CARE, Land o Lakes, Emmanuel International, World Fish, WFP/P4P.

combination, field agents and their managers, gain experience in using and analyzing market and business information. The training also allows users to build plans, prepare reports and share their findings with a tutor or amongst their team, to test their ability to identify the right types of information, systematize the information, print reports and then provide ideas and recommendations based on the test information. This prepares field agents to become field based business advisors.

The challenge of scale

In addition to the learning challenge, there is also a scale challenge in preparing business plans and calculating profitability for large numbers of farmers. Doing this on paper would take a long time and would require multiple reports. For example, if one field agent is supporting 10 farmer groups of 25 farmer, this requires information gathering followed by pre season and end of season profit analysis for 250 people per season. Farmbook helps the field agent to collect information and then supports a process of taking sample financial data from within a group of fairly homogenous farmers to develop customized information for all farmers in the group.

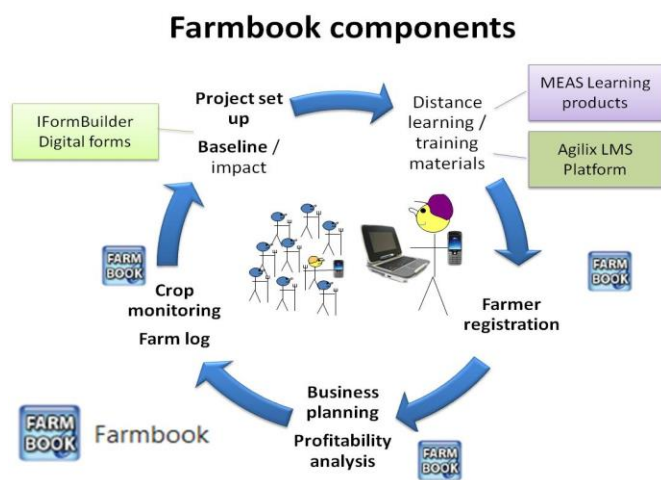
The business plan that is generated has three main elements, (i) narrative, (ii) gross margin analysis and (iii) implementation plan.

The Farmbook application has six basic functions, it allows the field agent to:-

- (i) Register people into households
- (ii) Register farmers into farmer groups,
- (iii) Enables farmers to run profitability analyses for specific products,
- (iv) Enables farmer groups to develop a business plans,
- (v) Supports crop production scheduling
- (vi) Allows field agents to record farm visits, training given and assets transferred,

How Farmbook works within a project

The diagram below shows how Farmbook is integrated into the overall agricultural project process. 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, such as IFormBuilder. This information sets the initial status of the community situation.



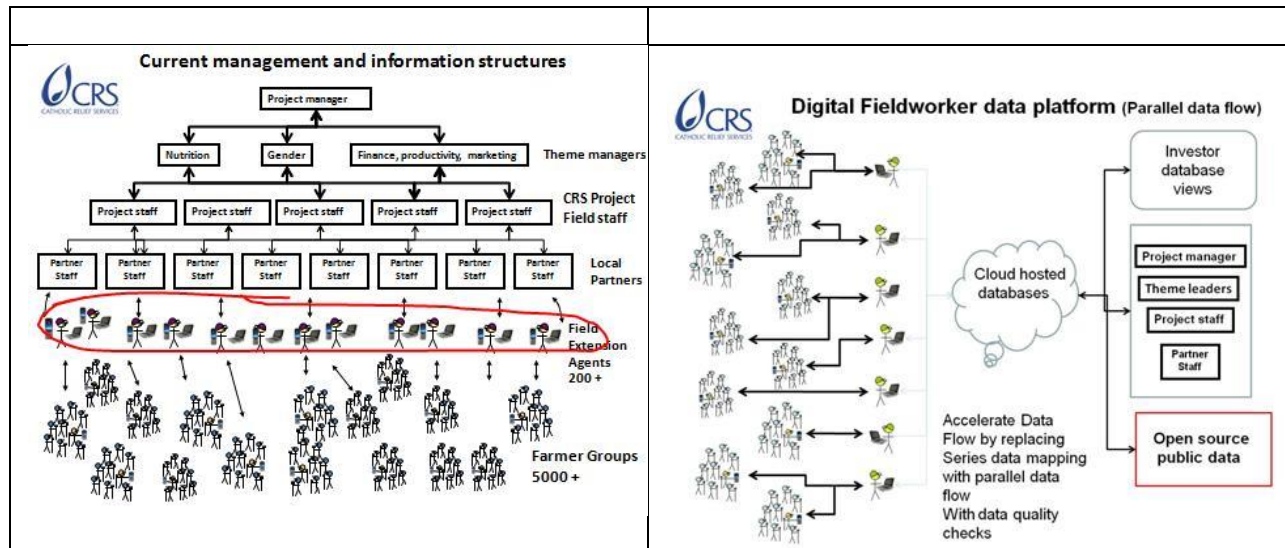
The training of field staff is done through a process of face to face training, complimented with occasionally connected distance learning products, such as the Agilix LMS, BrainHoney ToGo.

Farmbook is then used by the field agents to support and track the planning of a farmer group enterprise and the elements of training, asset transfer, business plan development and profitability analysis through the cropping season.

The Farmbook data tracks the delivery of services and assets such as training and provision of seeds for example, and then support the collection of information on seasonal market performance. This information can be used to make corrective management decisions during the project and supports the final data collection and analysis which is done at the end of the project.

How Farmbook works in the field

Farm book and the support training was designed for field agents as shown in the diagram below. To be effective business advisors, they require a some form of mobile data device, on which to gather information in unconnected mode. When these field agents return to a connected area, they can synchronize their data into a general database which can be accessed by other managers. They can assess the data using compiled reports or export data for more detailed analysis.



Mapping and tracking function

The development team is working with a number of field agents in southern Africa to test the application and improve it prior to more general release. The development team is currently working on a low cost map and track function that will allow field agents to record their activities in the field in near real time. This is an important function in the overall design as this process helps to monitor field activities more effectively and enables team supervisors and managers to have a better process of linking training and technology sharing with performance monitoring. This process will also help to support payments to field agents, based on their work plans, subsequent travel, service delivery and performance tracking.

General Reporting

Farmbook was primarily developed to provide information to farmers. In many cases extension workers provide training but little data analysis of farm performance and sharing of this analysis with farmers. Farmbook provides farmers with customized business plans, that provide individual farmers with details about their costs, revenues, sales and profits, including the costs of their loans for investments in a particular product from planning to sales.

The analysis and reports from Farmbook can be generated with farmers. The reports such as the business plan, financial analysis and implementation plan, can then be printed by the field agent when they return to their offices. On their return visit to the farmers, these physical reports can be shared with farmers, for their records and subsequent analysis. The business plan report is of considerable interest to farmers, who may not have access to this type of information. For the project, the information generated provides a rich source of data that can be integrated into the overall monitoring and evaluation process.

Conclusion

Farmbook, is currently in field testing in Zambia, Zimbabwe, Madagascar and Malawi. The results from the test period will be consolidated to help in the development of a fully functional production application. At this time, the plan is to share this application with commercial partners, who will then offer Farmbook services through a software as a service to other NGO's, farmer Unions, cooperatives, extension services and companies who would like to gather systematic information on the cropping performance of smallholder farmers.