



Farmers Fail to Benefit if Training Fails to Hit the Spot

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Training can be a powerful instrument to foster change. It is probably the single most common developmental intervention in the world of agriculture. But as COSA's Carlos de los Rios* and Daniele Giovannucci argue, evidence is mounting that all too often it doesn't meet its objectives**

That training programmes don't meet their objectives might seem surprising to many in the coffee and cocoa sectors, but just as surprising is the fact that even organizations with international reputations are not immune from delivering or funding ineffective training.

So, if training is not as effective as we thought, then why do so many programmes keep financing it and how can we improve it?

COSA used data and observations to review the effect of trainings conducted by an array of well-known international and national organizations in coffee regions of Ethiopia, Guatemala, Kenya, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Peru, and found some approaches that tend to work but others that are less likely to be effective. What makes the difference?

Why things go wrong

We rely on training, in part, because in many areas of human endeavour, a lot of training really does work. In basic industrial settings, for example, most workers respond well to day or more of training to begin operating in a factory assembly line. So, it seems a logical leap to apply that to other endeavours. But farming is very different: cultural factors have a large influence; farmers are more heterogeneous than we often assume; their personal calculation of costs and benefits can be complex considering age, weather, family condition, and price trends; and it takes months or years to see results.

Such factors offer insights for how to do better, but they also begin to reveal the flaws in the rationale of much of what is offered as training.

When farmers are asked their opinion of a training programme, they tend to report positively. Indeed, there is a lot of good training available. The fundamental problem is that is all too often the training that is given is not what a farmer actually needs, or it is not provided in a way they can readily adopt it.

We often fail to understand what motivates a farmer's calculus. We might assume, for example, that he or she values greater income or productivity above all other things. By listening we often learn that many other factors affect decisions. Thus, a farmer might conceptually understand from his or her training that a certain way to prune or a better fertilizer can potentially improve her yields by, say, 20 per cent but he or she may instead

determine that investing in a child's schooling or using the time to earn immediate cash for labour on a neighbouring farm could be a better and more secure choice.

There are also cultural considerations, such as farmers having cultivated the crops they grow in a particular way for many years. While working with the government of Yemen, we discovered in one region a common practice of killing earthworms (strangely called 'soil dragons') that never responded to training because farmers did not trust educated trainers telling them they play an invaluable role in healthy soil.

Hence, even an apparently logical training may not get adopted. And that is a critical point: only adoption matters. Counting how many farmers participate in training is useless without measuring adoption.

If results matter, then outcomes such as higher yield, lower harvest costs, and healthier trees or even impacts such as improved income also need to be looked at to determine the return on investment or return on the training investment.

Lessons for improvement

Successful training requires taking into account the local context and listening to farmers' actual needs. These are critical elements and require the time to build a relationship of real trust, especially at the early stages.

When Mexico's Agriculture Ministry wanted to resuscitate its moribund coffee sector, Director Santiago Arguello detailed how they first invested in adequate time visiting key regions, to listen and gain trust.

Doing so paid off with unprecedented success. The programme was designed in a way that resulted in an extraordinary level of adoption of novel seed-seedling and technology packages.

Of course, a lot of people will take free seeds and some training but adoption was not measured merely by that. Adoption was measured by how many of the living, 'climate-smart' plants were found on the farms.

Satisfaction levels with the programmes, measured independently, were exceptional. The ability to measure results quickly in the field opened the option for field technicians to better target farmers and groups with specific attention, to use their limited resources better. The remarkable results attest that it could serve as a guide for public programmes to aspire to in any country.

However, trust alone can be a pitfall. Even in 'train-the-trainers' cases where noted international experts taught local trainers to deliver training to farmers they knew, the results were not positive. ■ C&CI

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