



13

## LEARNING MORE FROM VIDEOS THAN FROM LEAD FARMERS

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When I set out for my student research, I did not anticipate learning much that I had not already read in the literature, because I thought farmers would be too shy to speak their minds. It turned out quite the opposite.

I also read that there were simply not enough extension workers to train individual farmers in Malawi. This turned out to be true. Even though the government extension workers conduct individual visits, there are too few of them to reach all farmers. Hence the Department of Agriculture introduced lead farmers as a way to help extension workers reach farmers, because lead farmers live within the communities.

However I learned that farmers neither trust nor listen to their lead farmers. This was during my first field visit. I did all of my field work with an organisation called NASFAM (National Smallholder Farmers' Association of Malawi).

Most farmers said that lead farmers are engaged with many agriculture NGOs. These lead farmers are not chosen by fellow farmers; they are wealthy farmers who receive resources from the agricultural NGOs. The lead farmers do not share the stuff they receive, they do not explain all the topics they learn about, but they accept new farming practices in order to receive free farming equipment. One farmer

pointed out to me that one lead farmer caters to 10 NGOs. As a result, lead farmers are set apart from the community.

However, I read that videos are able to reach many people at once. Videos are not biased towards an individual in a community. So I started to try and understand how farmers receive videos.

I talked to the farmers about the video which I wanted to show them, on fighting Striga and improving soil fertility. I wanted to find out the local practices used to control Striga, and what farmers knew on the methods to fight Striga.

Most of the farmers told me that they had no particular method because to them Striga was just



*Gifts of equipment and livestock may help to attract lead farmers, but also to alienate them from the neighbours they are supposed to teach.*

a simple weed, that would go away by itself. At the end of my interviews with the farmers I simply told them, “I can’t wait to hear your stories after watching the Striga video”.

It took me nearly 20 days to get all the screening equipment, and to talk to my peers and supervisors to prepare for my next visit. I went back to show farmers the video on fighting Striga and improving soil fertility. Few villages in Malawi have electricity, so I took a small generator and a projector. I used farmer clubs to show the videos. During this second visit, I went to two committee areas that have 10 clubs of 10 members each. The first day the generator failed. However, I was lucky because one of the farmers owned a television set, which I used.

There are 10 Striga videos and I showed 3 of them. So many farmers came on the first day that I asked the ones who came from afar to watch first. One farmer was 58 years old and he told me he travelled nearly 28 kilometres to watch the video. I did not believe him, so at the end of the day, we went together to drop him at home, only to discover he was telling the truth.

After screening the videos, I talked to individual farmers immediately, in order to see what they knew. The farmers had learned a lot by watching the videos.

I wondered what the 58-year-old farmer found most interesting in the videos. He told me that he learned that Striga was a weed that sucked nutrients from crops. He liked seeing the way people were working together to fight Striga, and he saw the actual colours of the flowers of both kinds of Striga. He said that the farmers were comfortable in front of the camera and that the methods to fight Striga were clear and simple to follow.

Most of the farmers I talked to said that the videos were good and of the right length (about 15 minutes). The videos did not take up much of their farming and business time. Farmers also appreciated the dances shown in the videos, which were entertaining. Farmers welcomed the videos, because they saw clearly how fellow farmers faced similar problems and how others dealt with Striga in simple ways which these farmers could also use.

I was still curious, so I went back after 30 days to see how well the farmers remembered what they watched,

what methods they were practicing from the videos, and what they thought about using videos to learn. When I arrived I had a chat with the 58-year-old farmer. He told me he arrived at 8 AM, hoping to watch the video again. However, I told him that I was there for a chat. He was sad, because he was expecting to watch the same video or a different one on agriculture. He told me, it would be important to re-watch, in order to be reminded.

During this third visit some farmers asked me to visit their farms, to see that no Striga had grown and that the crops were growing well, because they practiced the methods they watched on the videos. Nearly 60 farmers asked me, but I only had time to visit five of them. Two women with neighbouring farms were able to work together to remove Striga. One farmer stressed the clarity of the videos and how easy it was to follow their ideas.



*Farmers were keen to show what they had learned from videos about controlling the parasitic weed Striga.*

Farmers can learn more from videos than from a lead farmer, especially if the lead farmer is chosen by a project, not by the community, and if the lead farmers are motivated by the equipment they receive, not by a desire to share ideas with their neighbours.

A farmer from a foreign country, speaking on a video, may be more convincing than the lead farmers right there in the village.

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