

Zooming-in, zooming-out:

Farmer education videos: Are we getting it right?

by Paul Van Mele¹

“If we start promoting a stick with nails for transplanting rice, African agriculture will never advance and be able to feed its population,” exclaimed one of my upset colleagues after I had presented this local innovation during our Research Days in Cotonou, November 2008. Trying to convince him that it made perfect sense, after all it was a technology that saved labor, was at no avail. He had made up his mind. Yet, we had learnt so many things. For three years we had worked closely with rice farmers in 28 sites in Mali, Ghana, the Gambia and Guinea, witnessing how most farmers played around with new ideas and technologies to make them work in their conditions. The transplanting stick was a one-man response to the rope (which is often used in Asia, but which requires at least two people). African farmers are shorter of money and labor than of land.

Later on, we included the stick in one of our new videos. Since 2005, the Africa Rice Center (AfricaRice) has promoted video-mediated rural learning, and giving due attention to farmers’ knowledge and innovations had proven a key strength of our videos. During a writers’ workshop organized for the USAID Emergency Rice Initiative in early November 2009, in his story Amadou Gueye from the Catholic Relief Services included an interesting quote. Mamadou Aliou Baldé, a 40 year old farmer trainer in Saré Yoba Diéga village, southern Senegal, had told him after they had watched the videos: “I am really

Africa Rice Center (WARDA) facilitated the development and translation of eleven rice videos. From 2005 to 2009, WARDA partners translated them into 30 African languages. Open air video shows enhanced learning, experimentation, confidence, trust and group cohesion among rural people. The videos strengthened capacities of over 500 organisations and hundreds of thousands of farmers. WARDA’s integrated rural learning approach also helped women access new markets and credit.

Further reading: <http://warda.org/warda/p3rurallearning.asp>



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impressed with the way farmers from Mali transplant rice in lines and the material they use to remove the weeds. I see now that it is important to transplant in a line, since this makes it easier to weed. The farmers use local ways and means to keep the proper distance between lines in Kolda. Everybody can make and have a measuring stick.” So, how do we select topics for videos; what do we include and what not; and how do we best go about producing them?

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In what follows, I reflect on earlier articles² written on the zooming-in, zooming-out (ZIZO) method, which describe the steps needed to produce effective videos to scale up sustainable technologies (Van Mele, 2006, 2008). Currently, various new insights can be added and older ones re-emphasized. ZIZO basically evolves around five key steps or better guiding principles since they are not strictly in chronological order. Especially the first two principles may be reversed, or even integrated, depending on the situation.

1. Identify generic topic of regional relevance
2. Learn about context diversity through participatory research
3. Develop videos with local actors
4. Test videos in various contexts & fine-tune them
5. Scale-up and scale-out

Before we elaborate on each of the principles, it is good to remind us that this method is not a blueprint. Generally, however well we plan the video production, part of the content will change as it relies on interaction and feedback. Flexibility and eagerness to learn from people on the ground are key.

Identify generic topic of regional relevance

Making a nice video documentary on a project is one thing, producing a video that appeals to a wide range of organizations and individuals to be watched and shown to others yet another. First of all, the quality of the format and images matter. We worked with professional video makers from Countrywise Communication, UK to train and backstop local teams. In all the countries where we have worked, this has been a necessary and worthwhile investment. But even well-trained teams need to have an understanding of how to select priority topics.



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In my earlier papers, I proposed to start with broad multi-stakeholder consultations to help define learning needs of regionally relevance. Although useful, other ways can be explored. For instance, as mentioned above, we had this four-country project on participatory learning and action research that gave us a golden opportunity to gain insights from farmers. A multi-stakeholder consultation would probably not have yielded the same depth of insights.

Generic topics can also be identified by reading old annual reports. For instance, when I read reports from my institute (at the time called WARDA) written in the 1980s and 1990s, birds were frequently listed as a key problem to rice and seed producers. Field visits and interactions with colleagues revealed that this problem is still widespread. Scaring birds will be a topic for an upcoming video.

Learn about context diversity through participatory research

Is participatory research the only way to learn about context diversity? Surely it is a useful approach, especially if it is conducted at a regional scale. But we do not have to start from scratch all the time, and sometimes we can learn in other ways.

² Rural Development News 1/2008

When AfricaRice asked the anthropologist Jeffery Bentley to evaluate the project, he revealed various local innovations that had remained unnoticed to the project staff who were involved in the participatory research (Bentley et al., 2010). Sometimes an experienced outsider sees more than those directly involved on the ground.

To learn about creative methods that farmers use to reduce bird damage, AfricaRice developed interactive radio scripts that will be shared by Farm Radio International (FRI) with their 300 plus rural radios across Africa. The feedback that local broadcasters collect from their audience will be used as inspiration for the video script.

The past decades have also seen a boom of farmer field schools (FFS) in Asia, Africa and Latin America (van den Berg & Jiggins, 2007; FAO, 2008). Their wealth of experiences and regional insights are a gold mine for the exploration of the development of farmer-to-farmer videos whereby a number of selected FFS graduates could share their learning.

Deep and useful insights into local knowledge and contexts also exist in networks such as Prolinnova, an NGO-initiated programme to build a global learning network to promote local innovation in ecologically-oriented agriculture and natural resource management (Wettasinha et al., 2008).

Develop videos with local actors

At this stage people often think that we hand over the camera to farmers. Well we don't. We recognize that multiple skills and expertise are needed at various levels to obtain attractive and effective videos, hence our initial focus to train local teams in video development techniques. These teams do not involve farmers as we know that farmers have no spare time and are unlikely to continue making new videos once a project is over. Letting farmers film is more often used to bring out delicate community issues in the open. It aims more at engaging those within the community where the video is made to discuss these issues with one another, than at building capacities on a broader regional scale (Lie & Mandler, 2009).

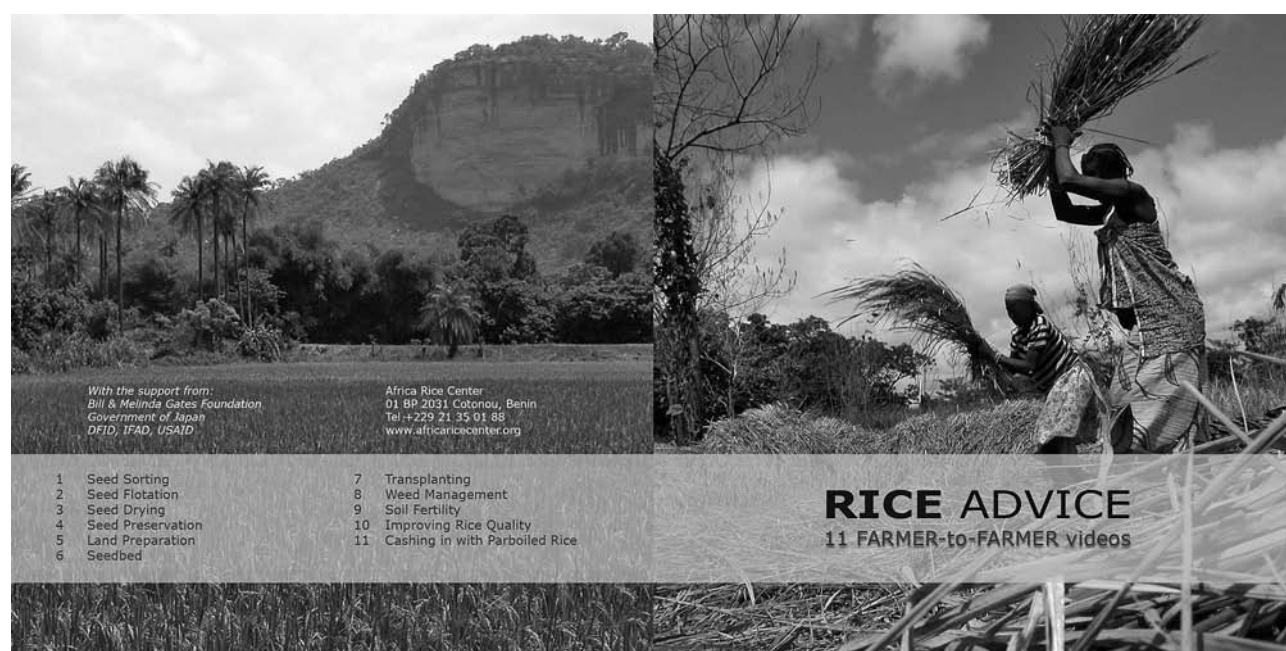
Prior to developing the videos we invest a lot in script research and engage with researchers and field staff who are familiar with both the subject matter and the rural realities. Staffs that are/were involved in participatory processes with communities are logically members of the team and play an important role prior and during filming.

And we do engage intensively with farmers during the filming. While filming in Mali, for instance, a few farmers showed us how they make seedbeds in different ways depending on the location and topography in the inland valley. We learnt about the need to control run off water, as well as to control frogs from entering young seedbeds (which is a problem in especially the lower parts of the valleys). No book or manual ever mentioned this, yet the fact that farmers explicitly showed us, meant it mattered to them. After the filming was completed, we modified the video script further to accommodate these new insights.

Test videos in various contexts & fine-tune them

We have not always adhered to this principle, because of budgetary and time constraints. That being said, the scripts of our last series of videos on integrated rice management went through as many as 11 iterations and involved partners from different countries.

An interesting and recurring question from national public servants (research or extension) is whether they can change some of the images and the music into local ones, as they (erroneously) believe that this would make the videos more acceptable to their farmers. In fact, barriers to cross-cultural video-mediated learning are more of an institutional than a cultural nature (Van Mele et al., 2010). Nigerian farmers, for instance, never complained that Bangladeshi rice farmers show their practices from their villages, or that the music on some of videos that were filmed in Mali was Malian. When they watch a Bollywood movie, they equally expect to hear Indian music.



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Scale-up and scale-out

Videos that were made according to the zooming-in, zooming-out method will be of regional relevance and locally appropriate. If they appeal to a broad range of organizations, local language versions will further enable local dissemination and use of the videos. For instance, two years after the Bangladeshi rice seed videos were introduced in Africa they were available in 15 African languages, which further increased to 23 languages by 2009. As the videos were locally appropriate, many NGOs, development agencies, farmer organizations, national research and extension staff, as well as radio and TV broadcasters became involved in the translation and national dissemination.

Conclusion

While millions of dollars are invested in research and pilot-scale development projects (that are both equally needed), zooming-in, zooming-out offers some guiding principles that can greatly enhance the impact of international and regional organizations.

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