Using Video to Improve Information and Knowledge Flows From and Among Smallholders

Executive Summary

Concept: Use the medium of video to convey local information, knowledge, experiences, and needs from small-scale farmers to a broad audience of extension workers, researchers, NGOs, policy makers, and other farmers. The model outlined here provides a way to scale up the local use of video made by farmers as an effective tool for giving "voice" to smallholders.

Rationale: Agricultural information and knowledge systems are often focused on a one-directional model -- experts create informational content intended for *delivery* to smallholders. The merits of expanding that model to enable information to flow *from* farmers and *among* farmers are well-recognized. This would enable researchers' work to be better targeted and more effective in meeting smallholders' needs. In addition, policies and extension services could be better designed. Enabling better and broader information flow *among* farmers would have a different, but also substantial impact; studies have repeatedly shown that farmers cite other farmers as their primary source of information and that trust is a major determinant in farmers' effective use of information. A variety of technologies have been discussed to facilitate the information and knowledge flow from and among farmers (such as PDAs, mobile phones, and the use of telecentres), but video has been shown to be one of the easiest and most powerful media for farmers to use.

Local farmers conveying information in local languages to other farmers can come closer to addressing these issues than other forms of media. Despite the potential impact of using video with smallholders, finding a way to implement this concept in a scalable way -- traversing language, social, economic, and cultural barriers -- has proved elusive. This note proposes a project where a large number of village-level "farmer-reporters" generate video essays/films on local agricultural topics. The videos are edited, translated, and tagged; and text summaries are created, resulting in a library of video and text information that is highly accessible and searchable. Regionally the videos in local languages can be used to convey information to other farmers. In aggregate, videos and text summaries that are well-tagged provide a resource that supports further analysis and the conveyance of critical information to NARs, CGIAR Centres, extension workers, universities, policy makers, and others.

The project is designed to leverage the local knowledge of NGOs and their ability to identify women farmers in surrounding communities that are most likely to succeed as a "reporters." NGOs are used as centers for training the reporters, as well as for video editing, translating, tagging, and producing text summaries.

The project begins with an RFP allowing NGOs to provide documentation as to their suitability for inclusion in the project. Each NGO is granted funding for 3 years to support the hiring of one staff person skilled in video production, reporting, leadership training, etc. The staff person will train and supervise the village level "reporters" as well as edit and produce the final product video essays. Additionally, each NGO is given necessary equipment, including video cameras which can be "checked out" from the NGO for use by the identified reporters in local villages.

The NGO staff person sponsored by the initial grant has clear deliverables on which continued funding is dependent. As well as delivering a specified number of final product educational video articles each month, the staff person is responsible for the training of local village-level "reporters" in leadership skills, equipment operations, and reporting skills. In order to allow for targeted research questions from a variety of sources, some percentage of the video articles would be on subjects generated by the researchers, policymakers, etc. For example, a request from a CGIAR centre on post-harvest processing and storage of a particular crop may result in information that is useful in selecting traits for plant breeding research. Or the requested feedback in video essays could be coordinated with testing the adoption of a new crop variety or new technology in the same villages. Other video essay topics would be chosen by the reporter, reflecting agricultural topics of local importance.

Expected Benefits of the Project: This project will train a large number of rural women in leadership skills and provide them with the means to document and share local agricultural knowledge both with other rural communities and with other stakeholders in the information system important to smallholder farmers. A searchable library of videos and text summaries will allow research, policy, and donor investments to be better targeted and more effective. The project design allows for critical, directed feedback on questions that may be relevant to other stakeholders in the information system.

Scalability and Sustainability: The project is scalable because it leverages local NGOs and provides incentives for them to participate in a proscribed way. The NGO benefits from gaining the capacity to make videos, as their own work can be promoted through the newly enabled medium. The collection of knowledge from smallholders and allowing for its use by an international community is unlikely to lend itself to a business model and may need continued sponsorship for the production of a public good. There are some possibilities for dual use of the video equipment. In India, for instance, where this model has been tried on a small scale, the equipment and expertise was hired to produce wedding videos.

Projected Costs:

Measures of Success: The outcomes of the project would be evaluated. The skills of village-level video "reporters" will, in part, reflect whether the NGO was effective in training. The quantity and quality of the films and text summaries produced can be ascertained by ratings from viewers/readers as to their relevancy, their ability to convey knowledge, etc.

Risks: There are implementation risks in terms of dependence on NGOs for success. The project requires coordination among many NGOs that is best achieved by an oversight organization. This organization will face complexities in dealing with so many local organizations and may face a number of defaults as the performance requirements are enforced. Anticipating the incentives of the NGOs and aligning the project with them may be difficult. There will be challenges with equipment – maintenance issues, theft, etc. In addition, there are risks as to whether the locally contextualized knowledge from farmers can be made relevant to a broader audience (whether it is other villages within the region, or research centers half way across the world). Perhaps the largest risk lies in the fact that the information gathered is, by its nature, ad hoc. Basing a video on one lead farmer in a community who describes his experience with a new technology, for instance,

is not the same quality of information as a carefully constructed survey that can provide a much more in depth understanding over many farmers of the context in which the new technology is being used. Unless the information produced is used carefully, there is the potential that decisions based on this body of information may not be optimal.