AGRA Capacity Building Strategy: 
Enhancing Capacity for Agricultural Systems

Background and Introduction

AGRA's mission is to transform African agriculture into a productive, efficient, competitive and sustainable production and marketing system that assures food security and lifts millions out of poverty. This requires a cadre of scientists, technicians, agri-business leaders, and farmers with a wide range of skills and knowledge. Indeed, the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Program (CAADP) compacts all highlight the need for human resources development at all levels of the agriculture sector.

The aim of the AGRA capacity building initiative is to develop the skill sets and capabilities required to promote transformation of smallholder-based agriculture in sub-Saharan Africa. It focuses on addressing capacity gaps along the value chain to ensure human and institutional resources are available to develop solutions to the problems smallholder farmer face. The initiative is anchored in AGRA’s goal of doubling the incomes of 30 million farmers over a five-year period in 11 focus countries (Burkina Faso, Ghana, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, Rwanda, and Uganda). This is delivered within the context of a partnership of educational institutions, donors, major Africa-wide think tanks, national agricultural research systems (NARS), and private sector companies, with AGRA playing a facilitator role.

The focus of AGRA’s capacity building initiative ranges from farmer-level training in modern production techniques to PhD fellowships in various agriculture-related disciplines and includes a wide range of actors. These interventions have included postgraduate degree training in seeds, soils, and applied agricultural economics, supply of business development services at agri-business firm level, and short-term training of seed industry personnel, research support staff, extension staff, and farmers.

AGRA has a rich history of increasing African knowledge and capability in seeds, soils and applied agricultural economics and policy. Since 2007, the capacity building initiative has contributed to a large pool of young professionals in agriculture, including 1,100 post-graduate degrees awarded (about 40% of these being women) to bright, motivated specialists who are developing solutions to smallholder farmer challenges in seeds, soils, and policy throughout Africa. Training in business development and support services has given rise to over 600 small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and agri-businesses which buy and process farmers’ produce. Additionally, over 950 seed enterprise personnel from over 100 seed companies have been trained to improve the efficiency, reach and profits of these key companies. Approximately 260 laboratory and field technicians, 4,900 extension agents, and 2,780 fertilizer inspectors have been equipped to do their work more efficiently. AGRA has further increased the institutional capacities of 15 African universities, 17 NARS, and several CGIAR centers across the continent.

AGRA’s Approach to Capacity Building

In this new strategy AGRA’s mission has evolved from knowledge and technology development to transfer and utilization of the fruits of the knowledge to and by the farmers. This amplification will ensure AGRA is able to scale out technologies and therefore directly reach out to millions of farmers. AGRA intervenes in capacity building through a system-wide approach to improve the quality, ease of access, and range of technologies and services reaching Africa’s farmers. Fig 1
before shows the AGRA capacity building interventions in the past (technology generation) and
the focus of the new strategy on transfer and utilization of technology and knowledge by small-
holder farmers.

![Diagram](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

**Figure 1: AGRA Capacity building strategy**

### Capacity Building for Agriculture Systems

The previous capacity building funded activities focused on developing technology generators have
demonstrated the ability of several institutions in sub-Saharan Africa to train various levels of personnel.
Going forward, the training will focus mainly on institutions and people close to farmers to enable the
scale-out of technologies. Interventions will be based on the needs and demand assessed by the
agriculture sector in the various agro-ecologies and/or countries. These activities will be integrated
through joint grant-making and management arrangements across various agricultural disciplines
building on previous investments in selected institutions. The selection
of institutions will be based on proven and successful management of
regional training initiatives and will benefit from significant infrastructure
improvements by AGRA or other partners.

1. AGRA proposes to have a strong private sector linkage enabling
   the trainees to be mentored within the sector where possi-
   ble.

2. The activities will foster strong partnerships with
   both the public and private sectors to enhance the
   relevance of the training programs and sustain them
   once the AGRA funding ceases.

3. The training programs will be outcome-oriented in de-
   sign and will focus especially on enhancing smallholder
   productivity, sustainability, and incomes.

The target group includes technical training (extension and
technicians), and training the institutions that work with
farmers and farmer groups such as SMEs (Figure 2). Within this group is also a small target group of AGRA
grantees that will be trained
to ensure effective implementation
of grants. This is described in the next section.

![Diagram](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

**Figure 2: Proposed targets of personnel to be
trained at different levels**
Capacity Building: Enhancing capacity for agricultural systems

Focus Areas and Interventions

Current agricultural training at both formal and informal levels is narrow, mainly with a production focus that does not position agriculture in the broader context of rural development and agriculture systems. The focus of this program is 2 fold; to enhance the capacity of last mile delivery of technology to farmers and to build capacity of grantees to ensure effective implementation of programs. The first intervention’s focus is to strengthen systems through unblocking capacities using targeted short term training, technical assistance, business development and practical demonstrations of interventions especially in the areas of knowledge and service provision to farmers. The second intervention focuses on assessing and addressing capacity gaps identified in the institutions that are implementing grants in partnership with AGRA. The following section briefly describes the proposed interventions:

1. Enhance capacity for last mile delivery of technology to farmers

This intervention is where most people will be trained as it directly provides goods and services to smallholder farmers to increase not only their productivity but also their incomes. This will be realized through interventions specific to institutions in the public and private sectors, and specifically those that work directly with smallholder farmers. In the public sector AGRA will train trainers of extension workers and community based agents (CBAs or village based agents (VBAs)), fertilizer inspectors, and research and laboratory technicians to ensure assessment of problems and delivery of the appropriate technologies generated from research and industry reaches smallholder farmers. At private sector level, the capacity of SMEs along the value chain will be strengthened both through business and technical skills training.

1.1 Training of trainers for the public sector

Extension services

Extension services are an important mechanism for communicating and demonstrating new technologies and practices to farmers, and goes hand-in-hand with technological advances such as improved varieties, fertilizer blends, and mobile technologies. Thus, the need to provide practical skills, to change attitudes, and to impart knowledge related to occupations in agriculture with the aim of addressing various challenges in the value chain. AGRA will train trainers, deliberately investing in skills development of extension workers and community...
based agents to ensure that innovations and technologies ultimately reach and benefit smallholder farmers for increased yields and better returns on their investments. AGRAs extension system strategy includes engaging and training thousands of community based agents to demonstrate technologies such as improved seeds and fertilizers through conducting mother demonstration plots and helping farmers develop small baby demonstration plots and therefore learn by doing. The CBAs will also serve as input dealers for input companies and or aggregators for output companies. They liaise with input companies to raise awareness of their products through providing small packs for farmers to try out in baby demos and if they are convinced will buy for the next season.

AGRA will support public, private and non-governmental organizations that conduct extension services to identify, develop and roll out several short-term training courses across crop value chains, utilizing existing extension training systems to train the CBAs and bring about systemic change. The focus of past training services has centered mainly on production aspects. Therefore incorporating short-term courses in post-harvest management, including value addition and agro-processing, agribusiness, marketing, finance among other value chain activities is critical and will be undertaken. The capacity of existing extension training systems will be strengthened to utilize modern and efficient information and communication technology (ICT) tools available in the countries, including mobile telephony. The trained extension workers will in turn train hundreds of village based agents who will work daily with farmers in the mother demo trials, and in input and output market establishment to increase extension service reach to smallholder farmers. The CBAs will be trained using different methods including classroom and on site practical training in courses that include the ones mentioned above and also how to train farmers and become vendors.

Other public service personnel to be trained based on need

These include fertilizer inspectors, research and laboratory technicians who will also receive training based on demand from the 11 countries. These services are critical in the accurate diagnosis of problems and recommendations of solutions that gets to farmers through the strengthened extension system.

1.2 Small to Medium Enterprises along the agricultural value chain

The SMEs involved in various sectors across the value chain (from seeds to markets) will be trained. Various studies assert that the agribusiness and agro-industry sectors have been the drivers of economic growth in countries across the globe. In Africa, these sectors account for more than 30% of national incomes, and for the bulk of export revenues and employment. Scaling up agribusiness could be the next growth frontier as it offers immediate value addition through commodity-based industrialization that exploits forward and backward linkages with the rest of the economy. In most African countries, this space is occupied by SMEs which have poor business and technical skills. SMEs involved in agribusiness will require more capacity as skills in business development remain a fundamental factor for increasing their productivity, profitability, and competitiveness. The shift from primary production to modern integrated agribusiness will provide lucrative opportunities to many smallholder farmers, many of whom are women, as well as generating jobs for the continent’s youth. The purpose of the training is to graduate the SMEs to bankable institutions that can access finances and continue to grow to serve even more small-scale farmers. The SMEs are trained using three key methods listed below

1. Short courses on basic business, marketing and technical aspects that affect most of the SMEs in a specific sector of the value chain
2. Business Development Services – this is a one on one consultant service with SMEs and can be 3-5 days or several months depending on the need

3. Mentoring and coaching – this is done by larger companies and or AGRA personnel

The short-term courses developed for SMEs will be based on demand and could include both business and technical aspects at the point where the SME serves in the value chain. The business courses could be similar across the value chain with examples selected from the sector being trained. The technical aspects could include, for example:

- Inputs—seed production and processing; quality management; fertilizer blending; and quality assurance
- Outputs—post-harvest management; value addition and processing; quality management; market systems; grades and standards; agricultural structured financing systems; food technology, among others

At institutional level, capacity strengthening will include infrastructural support, organizational development training, curriculum development, and ICT development. Common across the target institutions will be support in the development of appropriate curricula that would guarantee the realization of the much-needed skill sets and capabilities. To facilitate curriculum development, partnerships will be fostered with international level institutions with skill sets on both content and delivery methodologies for various stakeholders along the value chain. AGRA will start with institutions it has partnered with before such as Cornell University, Iowa State University, University of California Davis (in the US) and the Wageningen University and Research Centre (in the Netherlands).
2. Grantee capacity building

AGRA focuses on awarding targeted grants to various partners that implement programs addressing productivity and marketing failures in the value chain, closely monitoring them, and providing technical expertise and mentorship for the institutions’ success. These partners include public and private sector players ranging from farmers, farmer organizations, researchers within NARS and CG centers, academic institutions, SMEs involved in seed production and farm input distribution, grain aggregation and marketing, national and local governments, businesses, and civil society organizations. A deliberate effort has been made by AGRA to build up local capacity since they are already familiar with the African challenges and therefore likely to sustain the solutions beyond the project’s life span. However, the grantees are mostly hard to reach, few, and have not had many sponsors in the past. They are also scattered all over Africa. AGRA’s success is determined by its grantees’ capacity to deliver. The last 10 years have, however, highlighted that the ability of some critical AGRA grantees to deliver results is hindered by lack of capacity at the leadership, technical, and business levels.

AGRA therefore initiated various ad hoc systems to improve grantee capacity that were based on needs. These included Organizational Capacity Assessments (OCAs); Business Development Services (BDS); short-term training of grantees in various countries by AGRA staff (officers from the Grants Administration Unit, Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) and Internal Audit); and the establishment of the Seed Enterprise Management Institute (SEMI) programs at the University of Nairobi, Kenya (seeds only), and the University of Thies in Senegal. Although these activities have been successful, several areas of improvement have been identified. The unstructured approach results in exclusion of some grantees, and the extended interventions are not always informed by a standardized logical framework that is applied across all AGRA partners. The current system does not cover all elements of AGRA’s new strategy and due to the sizes of SMEs and different types of grantees, these are not always as targeted. In addition, the courses failed to address the weak areas identified by the OCA tool. The training did not adequately cover some critical areas of grant making and management such as proposal development, data capture and analysis, report writing, and overall project management.
The capacity building unit has developed a more rigorous, system wide capacity building of AGRA’s grantees that will be offered by African institutions working with international partners where necessary. AGRA will institutionalize comprehensive OCAs and analysis and ensure due diligence that includes visits to the institutions and interacting not only with the program managers but all other personnel involved in the grant implementation including the senior management within institutions, and finance and technical managers. The results of these assessments will be used to determine the targeted individual and institutional capacity building aspects the program managers and other key players in the grant management require. A capacity building plan is developed for the grantee based on the OCA assessments. The capacity building plan involves any of the following:

a. Setting aside a budget for grantees to develop and learn on their own
b. Hiring an external consultant who will be embedded within the grantee’s operations to assist with developing the grantee
c. Sending an AGRA expert to spend some time developing the grantee based on needs assessed
d. Sending the grantee for a short-term training course which addresses development needs identified.
e. Grantees can attend any of the short-term courses developed and explained in section above to gain technical and business skills on the specific area of the agriculture value chain they work in.

The OCA administration and analysis will be done by consulting services managed by AGRA.

The implementation of the capacity building plans will be done through a different consulting services. The BDS will be formally managed by AGRA through some consulting company, with clear selection criteria in place and insistence on a common training curriculum for all consultants who work with grantees on behalf of AGRA. The pool of BDS personnel will be trained by AGRA on mentorship and coaching and will be required to produce clear deliverables that can be measured. The training curriculum for the different types of grantees will be based on the SEMI programs at the University of Nairobi, Kenya (English), and University of Thies (French) in Senegal. Where possible, it will be developed and delivered by selected institutions in the geographic service areas. The SEMI model was based on identified key capacities that were lacking in seed companies and developed targeted 1 to 2-week courses to address these. Curricula will be developed for short-term courses whose duration will not be more than a week for all the grantees. The curricula will include business and technical aspects on specific areas of the agriculture value chain. Technical aspects such as seed production; seed processing; seed business and marketing for SME seed companies; post-harvest management (grain harvesting, threshing, cleaning, drying, storing, transportation, or shipping); supply chain management; good manufacturing practice; and management of grain handling facilities for SMEs involved in grain handling will be rolled out in the various regions AGRA works in. A schematic diagram of the process of grantee capacity building that are proposed is presented in Figure 3 below.
AGRA’s engagement in these activities will be grant making and matching, technical assistance, and grant management (oversight).

**Expected outcomes**

1. Enhanced institutional capacity to sustainably develop agriculture human resources in sub-Saharan Africa.

2. Improved capacity of African agricultural human resources (both researchers and other value chain actors) to develop and provide local technologies, goods and services to address smallholder farmers’ problems.

3. Improved agricultural knowledge, attitudes, and practices amongst smallholder farmers that lead to greater productivity, access to markets and financial services.

**Conclusion**

The focus of the capacity building initiative on vocational training institutions and individuals close to the farmers, a few scientists, and grantees will ensure effective scale out of technologies, access to inputs, markets, and other services to raise smallholder farmer productivity and incomes. This strategy will be implemented in collaboration with the other AGRA strategies on extension, seed supply, fertilizer supply, input distribution, and output markets.