

HOST FARMER DEMONSTRATIONS: A VIABLE STRATEGY FOR REACHING OUT TO GROWERS WITH NEW TOBACCO TECHNOLOGIES IN MALAWI

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Abstract

Tobacco is a major driving force for Malawi's economy, accounting for 60-70% of the country's foreign earnings and about 12% of its growth domestic product (GDP). With the repeal of the Special Crops Act in 1990, the country saw an influx of farmers venturing into burley tobacco production. This posed a challenge in the delivery of tobacco extension services in the sector. There are three main extension methods used in the dissemination of improved technologies and these are; Individual, Group and Mass methods. ARET uses all the three extension methods and approaches to reach out to farmers and one good example of such approaches is the host farmer demonstrations approach.

Despite the availability of the host farmer demonstrations approach as used by ARET, there is little information documented on how effective this approach is in reaching out to tobacco farmers. A review of reports was therefore done to find out how the host farmer demonstration approach has been fairing in reaching out to smallholder farmers recently.

Results of the data collected over the past three seasons indicate that host farmer demonstrations are very effective in reaching out to more tobacco farmers with new technologies and practices compared to the other approaches. During the 2011/12 growing season, 19,864 farmers attended host farmer demonstrations. In 2012/13 season, the number of attendants slightly dipped by 20% compared to the previous season. This was due to low average prices experienced during the previous season. In 2013/14 season, there was an upsurge of the attendants in host farmer demonstrations by 40% over the previous growing season. This was attributed to good average tobacco prices experienced during the 2012/13 season and entry of new government approved technologies by ARET. Farmers also had an opportunity to learn new tobacco technologies at host farmer demonstrations and practice in their fields, confirming the effectiveness of this approach.

Key words: host farmer demonstrations, technology dissemination, good agriculture practice

OBJECTIVES

The main objective of the study was to assess the effectiveness of the host farmer demonstrations approach. Specifically, the study was aimed at finding out the number of smallholder tobacco farmers reached out with improved technologies and information and type of messages disseminated through host farmer demonstrations.

METHODOLOGY

The study was done through a review of technical reports by ARET's Department of Extension and Specialist Services from 2012/13 to 2013/2014 growing seasons. The focus of the study was on an innovative extension approach called 'host farmer demonstrations'. Data on number of contacts made through this approach was collected by ARET's Extension Agents from all extension areas in Malawi during the past three growing seasons. This data was compiled and analysed using Excel Computer Package.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

- Results of the analysed data over the past three seasons are shown in figure 1. During the 2011/12 growing season, almost 19,864 farmers participated in tobacco activities through host farmer demonstrations.
- In 2012/13 season, the number of attendants at host farmer demonstrations slightly dipped by 20% compared to the previous season. This was probably due to the fact that tobacco experienced low average prices during the 2011/12 season which according to Tobacco Control Commission (2015) was due to low tobacco production in 2012/13 season. It was during this time that the average tobacco prices shifted from the previous US\$1.24 per kilo of cured tobacco in 2011/12 season to US\$2.23 in 2012/13 which motivated more farmers to get back to tobacco farming. The second reason was that there was partial entry of new government approved technologies by ARET that appeared to excite the majority of the farmers, confirming the significance of continuous innovations especially cultivar development which appear to get a lot of attention and interest amongst farmers.
- Farmers had an opportunity to learn from these demonstration sessions and practice in their fields, confirming the effectiveness of this approach in reaching out to tobacco farmers in Malawi. This was evidenced by the kind of questions they could ask during demonstration sessions and observations Extensions Agents made when visiting their fields. Boleman (2007) found that the rate of adoption of new agricultural technologies by farmers is enhanced through demonstrations compared to other extension methods because farmers have a chance to see and practice for themselves.

- The study also revealed that host demonstrations are flexible in the sense that they can host field days, group sessions and field tours, among others. They also allow tobacco stakeholders such as chemical suppliers, financial lending institutions to promote their products to farmers and interested members. For instance, during the 2013/14 season, Malawi Savings Bank and NICO general Insurance Company sponsored host farmer demonstrations to promote their products such as loans and insurance services to tobacco farmers in Malawi.
- Messages that appeared to attract most farmers to such host farmer demonstrations were mainly on recently released tobacco technologies such as ABH varieties and slow release fertilisers. There was also an interest on topics that were not on demonstrations but which appeared to be pertinent to the farmers. Farmers were taking advantage of these host farmer demonstrations as foras to ask questions pertaining to the global decline in tobacco prices and where to get certain inputs such as agrochemicals and fertilisers.

Fig. 1 Farmer Contacts through Host farmer demonstrations over the past 3 Cropping Seasons

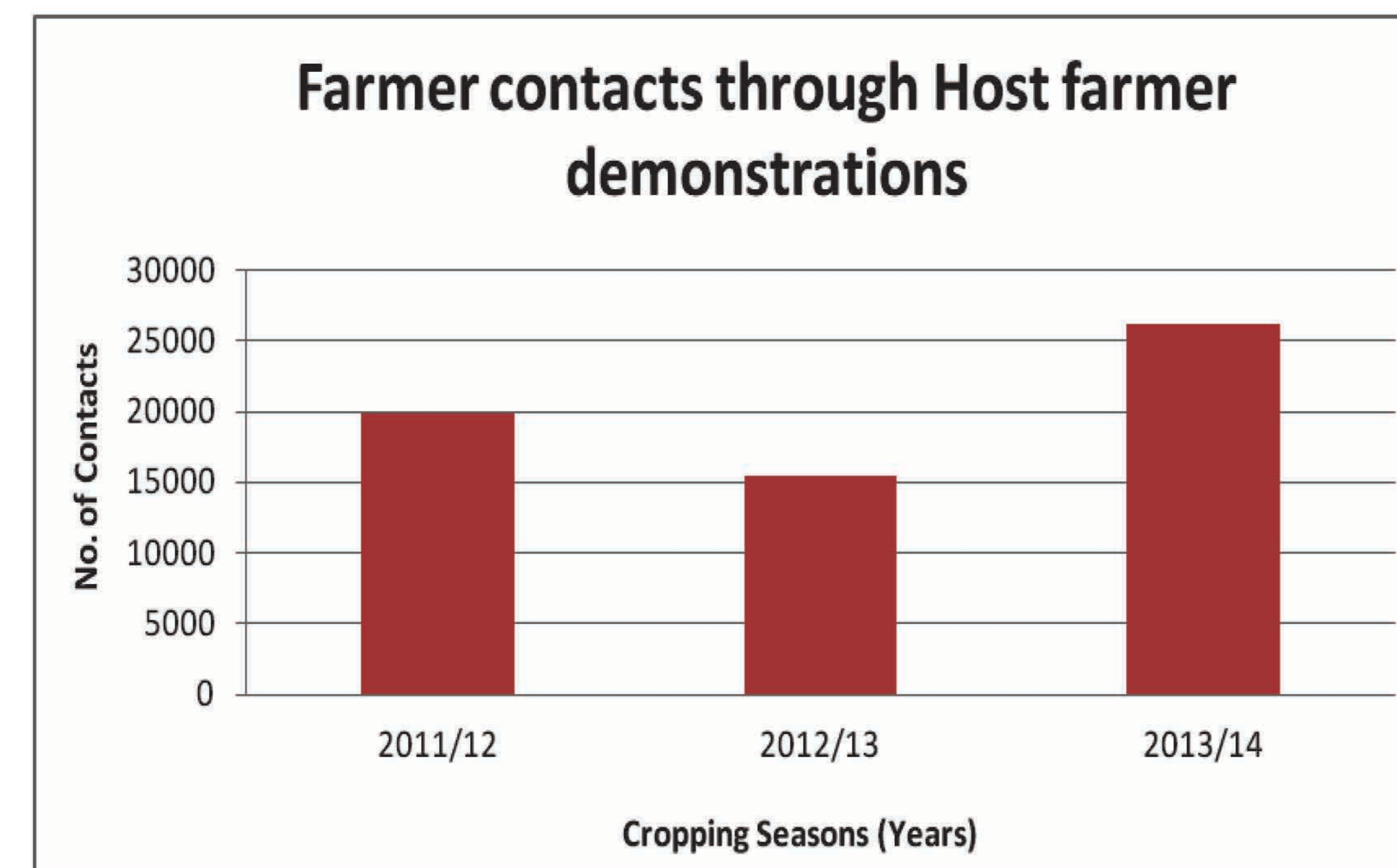


Fig. 2: Farmers during water planting activity



Fig. 3: Host farmer demonstration showcasing ABH Varieties



CONCLUSION

- The study has shown that host farmer demonstrations are very effective in reaching out to more tobacco farmers with new technologies and practices.
- The benefits of this concept are many: Farmers have an opportunity to see, practice and adopt newly released technologies since the demonstrations provide a platform for interaction among researchers, extension agents, farmers and other stakeholders and more farmers are reached out with new information and technologies.
- In view of this, ARET will continue to use host farmer demonstrations as one of its key strategies in technology dissemination alongside other methodologies and approaches to reach out to tobacco farmers in Malawi.

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