



Snapshot: Agricultural Advisory & Demo Plots

Introduction

SOBA partnered with [TJAL Enterprises](#) to launch its agro-dealer network in Sierra Leone, offering a wider variety of agro-inputs alongside agricultural advisory to farmers through its 32 agents located around the country. As part of this effort, TJAL partnered with high performing agro-dealers – backed by SOBA’s initial support – to employ demonstration plots.

TJAL’s demo plots were used as educational and promotional tools. The plots featured both familiar and unfamiliar crops, served as training ground for local farmers and led by TJAL’s agronomists, and helped agro-dealers to grow their farmer client base and to generate sales.

Background

Farmers throughout Sierra Leone employ traditional farming methods and with saved seeds. Application is rarely informed by the latest agronomic information or done with improved technologies. Many farmers in Sierra Leone still prefer using locally-cultivated seeds as opposed to hybrid options, even if they perform better in Sierra Leone’s tropical weather conditions and soils. Additionally, there are significant knowledge gaps regarding best planting, cultivation and harvesting practices, which impact potential yields.

Poor output leads to minimal earnings; tight earnings beget risk aversion. Farmers are rarely willing to make changes without prior proof of performance – particularly when some imported seeds and other inputs haven’t consistently yielded results for peers. Consequently, farmers stick with what they know and trust; unfortunately, these aren’t the practices and products that will help them to grow.



Farmer knowledge gaps include:

- Lack of planting guides: information on production periods, when and how to plant for better yields, fertilizer benefits and usage.
- Little knowledge on Good Agricultural Practice (GAP): farmers continue to use outdated, traditional methods when planting and cultivating.
- Lack of pest and disease knowledge and diagnostic support. Pests and diseases are inevitable and require controls. More technical support is required.

Demonstration Plots Tactic

Improved cultivation practices and use of new technologies among small and growing farmers is a long-term and complex challenge. It requires a multifaceted solution – leveraging cooperation between public and private entities.

One tactic, among others employed by SOBA and partners, was the demonstration plot. Demo plots are not new to agricultural behaviour change nor Sierra Leone, but they are a new investment for ag-inputs and services distributors in the country – most of whom had not targeted upcountry farmers directly nor provided advisory information alongside product resale previously.

What happened?

- **Set-Up:** TJAL established eight demo plots in partnership with high performing agro-dealers within TJAL's own agent network and throughout the country. TJAL's agronomists set-up the plots and provided guidance/training for best plot management constantly.
- **Agent-Led:** The implementation model places agents at the forefront by giving them ownership to manage and run demo plot activities. Agents were responsible for land selection and plot management, while TJAL offered seeds and other inputs alongside agronomic training and support.
- **Training Tool:** Farmers were organised to witness, to learn and to participate in planting, transplanting, weeding, fertilizer application and chemical application activities.
- **Client Outreach:** Demo plots and training events were also utilized to attract new farmer clients for agro-dealers and TJAL widely. As well, the plots and events were utilized to attract purchase for previously unknown or undervalued inputs.
- **Promotion:** TJAL utilized demo-based training events to promote products, discussing product lines, describing product benefits, and offering special purchase promotions to farmers.

Results & Reflection

- TJAL was able to sell more and different products as a result of the trainings. Farmers who attended often chose to purchase products promoted.
- Some seeds didn't perform well, illuminating a larger seed inventory management gap at TJAL. Consequently, TJAL structured a sole distributor relationship for Sierra Leone with Technisem, seed supplier, and updated the varieties and quality of seeds on offer. TJAL also established a seed-specific inventory management system. The company also replaced all underperforming demo plots and reached out to farmers actively to recall seeds purchased and to inform them of the changes made to rectify underperformance going forward.
- TJAL agro-dealers are limited in their own product and cultivation understanding. Participating in trainings and leading demo plots built their knowledge base and helped them to provide better information to farmers. Based on 2015 survey led by SOBA, farmers receive most of their information regarding farming practices from agro-dealers. Agro-dealer capacity and knowledge is thus very important.
- TJAL agro-dealers were able to establish new farmer clients and to grow their trust base within local farming communities. Ultimately, this led to improved sales in the short-term. Hopefully, it will lead to reinvestment in expanded inventory and outreach over the long-term – this remains to be seen.
- Farmers who attended demo plot-based training indicated that they gained important knowledge, particularly on pest and disease identification and management and harvest/storage management.

Replication and Investment

- TJAL has begun to plan for further demo plots, learning from these experiences by focusing on working with agents with the most commitment, identifying better parcels of land, and resolving to have TJAL's agronomist invest more time with the agents and their care-takers – indicating that despite the setbacks, TJAL intends to continue ahead with demo plots and in absence of SOBA support, learning from past mistakes to deliver better.
- TJAL is no longer the only ag-inputs distributor investing in demo plots. In 2017, Nianda and Seed Tech have all invested in demonstration plots – independently of SOBA's support – as a means to educate and to attract consumers. These are significant financial and management outlays. This reflects a significant reorientation for distributors towards pro-active use of embedded, good agronomic practice advisory as a means through which to demonstrate value to their market.

Learn more: www.sobasl.org

Sierra Leone Opportunities for Business Action (SOBA) is a private sector development programme that uses a market systems approach to facilitate pro-poor economic growth in Sierra Leone. The programme collaborates with private sector businesses in three primary areas: (1) agriculture, (2) renewable energy, (3) professional services and entrepreneurship markets, to trial and to scale innovative and inclusive business practices that reduce poverty and improve economic opportunities for poor women and men. SOBA is funded by UK Aid and implemented by Adam Smith International.

Between 2014 and 2017, SOBA sought to catalyse a better connected and more capacitated agri-input sector that created viable business opportunities among Freetown-based input distributors, provincial agro-dealers, and international input suppliers to pursue the smallholder farmer market across the country. SOBA's strategy for intervention was to focus on Freetown distributors who, as they became effective distributors, affect change upstream and downstream in the ag-inputs supply chain.