

Going Public: Extension in Markets

By Dr Eric Boa¹

Going public is the name of a new method for extension work with farmers in a rural setting. It makes use of public spaces, such as markets or bus terminals, for spontaneous conversations with a greater number of farmers. Extension workers have repeatedly and successfully applied this method in Bolivia² and Bangladesh. The following article is a reflection on a further experience in Uganda.

First time try

Kamus Corner³ is the premier banana market in the eastern region of Uganda. It is situated on the slopes of Mt Elgon on the border between Kapcherwa and Sironko districts. Held on a Wednesday and Saturday, it attracts many buyers, including ones from Kenya. Within Uganda, the bananas are transported as far as Kampala to the west and Kumi to the north. The bananas come from a relatively small radius, estimated at 5-10 km, and determined by the time taken to walk to market. I didn't see any evidence of trucks bringing in bananas from growers but there were plenty of trucks going out.

¹ e.boa@cabi.org. Extract from consultancy for DANIDA in March 2004.

² see BN 1/2005 for more information

Getting started

We (myself and the six facilitators) went to Kamus Corner. I asked the facilitators to draw some pictures of banana plants the night before so that they could show key features of the disease, a simple visual aid for the market. I wrote a short account to explain a little more about *Going Public* though I suspect this was more useful after the event than before. We took a few of the photosheets showing symptoms of BBW (banana bacterial wilt disease). Demand for photographs quickly outstripped supply. We didn't have handouts saying who we were and how to contact us later, a small but important thing I forgot to do. Always let people know who you are and where you come from.



Many smaller vendors made the tricky journey down the hill with their laden bicycles, to the towns and villages of Mbale district.

After the event I thought it would be useful to have a painted sign at the entrance to the market mentioning the disease, a contact point, and with a simple illustration of key symptoms. You could potentially contact up to 1000 people with simple messages in one market day. Another

possibility is a notice board with basic information. Getting permission for this and other activities is important. We got the approval of the market master for our stall without any difficulty. A local contact is useful and the District Agricultural Officer from Mbale helped us find our way around. We borrowed a table from a nearby office and placed the drawings and photos for people to see. In this instance we thought bringing diseased plant material was not a good idea.

I was eager to try *Going Public* because I was convinced that it had a part to play in the BBW campaign. Initial reactions to my proposal were lukewarm but it was agreed in the Working Group that we should have a go. It was good to be set a challenge, to see if I was right. And without rigorous testing and iteration good ideas never become great ideas. I'm intrigued to see how people adapt and adopt the method to their own circumstance and if they feel at home with *Going Public*. It's not for everyone to perform.

What exactly is *Going Public*?

It's an extension method that's more than a simple demonstration. You go to a public place where large numbers of people congregate as a matter of course, such as a market place. We've used a bus stop in Bolivia and a future possibility is to work the milling masses after a church service.

The three words that perhaps best describe *Going Public* are: cheap, quick and responsive. It is also a considerable challenge for those leading a session. The person behind the table has to balance the short explanation/ demonstration side of *Going Public* with listening and responding to the assembled audience. I encourage a second person to stand to the side making notes about what happens and what people say. We didn't do this formally at Kamus corner though we quickly learnt something new and revealing. The local name for BBW is *kyimvemwe* or firefly, on account of the glowing yellow colour of the first affected leaves, as was explained to us. This is the name we used throughout the morning in addition to our own 'banana bacterial wilt disease'. Talk in the language people understand.

On this wider issue, Mundaka was the only one who could speak and understand Lugisu, the language spoken by the Bagisu of Mbale and Sironko. The other language

used was Kuksabiny, from the Sabinu people, also from eastern Uganda. I spoke in English, as did most of the others, and we had little difficulty in holding conversations with most people.

Going Public differs from the institute stalls set up which displays maybe once or twice a year at agricultural fairs the wares and recent achievements of researchers. *Going Public* makes a conscious effort to gather information and to analyse it later to inform and direct future activities. For example, you may learn of one area where the disease is particularly severe or people who claim to have controlled the disease. *Going Public* is like a quick opinion poll. If a majority of people tell you something unusual or new (an effective control method for example) you can follow up the leads in more detail at a later date. Following-on shows that you are serious about helping farmers.

Cheap and cheerful

You turn up at a suitable place with minimal materials and complete the session in less than half a day. You have to prepare what you're going to say first but that shouldn't take too long to do. This doesn't cost a lot. A natural confidence in front of people and ability to improvise as you go along is important. You do have to work hard to attract people's attention and it can be frustrating at times when only three people are listening. There is no captive audience and people are free to come and go. But they can also hover around the fringes without having to feel embarrassed by standing at the front (and someone asking you a question).

Performing *Going Public* session is not for everyone. All of the six staff had a go at some time or other, some showing more enthusiasm and aptitude than others. A few moved along the row of banana sellers, talking to them about the disease and listening carefully to what they had to say. They did this without prompting from me. Okurut kept his messages short and responded well to questions. You don't teach *Going Public* to people, rather they, work to the normal rhythm of brief social encounters and of normal conversations, staying longer if someone is interested and moving on if they are not. It helped that we were dealing with a hugely important crop and the fact that most of our audience had heard about the disease.

Going Public is meant to be quick, using simple messages that can be got across in less than ten minutes. We showed the symptoms of the disease, explaining how the disease was spread. I stood in the back of a truck and mimicked an insect visiting the banana flowers and transferring the disease. My audience duly smiled at my showy antics though I'm not so sure how effectively I got my point across. A sidekick takes notes and asks for names and places people live. That allows the presenter to concentrate on the action part.



The presence of strangers and our Banana Doctor T-shirts caught the attention of people.

The audience renews itself naturally but usually after a few hours there is no one new to attend. Your novelty value has worn off. I was thrilled by the number of people selling bananas and the general hustle and bustle of the market place and there was a genuine buzz amongst the facilitators as we left Kamus Corner. Within a few minutes of arriving people were gathering round and from then on it remained busy at our two tables (one either end of the market) for almost three hours. Never assume that people will stop to listen and that's an important lesson when doing *Going Public*. You have to work hard but there are significant rewards. Working with people is fun but it's not easy.

You learn and I learn

Going Public is also an opportunity to listen and learn. The local name of *kyimavemwe* for BBW was new to everyone. We need to speak the language and use the lexicon of farmers to be most effective and that's one of the clear lessons that everyone understood better after this busy morning. We also explained about control but this first attempt at working in a market didn't provide us with the opportunity to discuss recommendations in detail. Many people asked us what would happen if people and animals ate the diseased bananas. Would they also become sick? You learn a lot in a short time about how people view plant diseases. What they ask you doesn't appear in books about plant pathology.

Okurut thought he had found an infected bunch for sale but this proved to be a false alarm. Still, he was able to point out that the disease could be spread through bunches sold wholesale in the market. The one group we had least success in talking to were the traders. They were busy checking the bananas being offered for sale. Next time we need to go up to them and talk directly about BBW. Positive engagement is encouraged by *Going*

Public and my own short experience of this method is that it has opened my eyes to many new opportunities to do things better for farmers.

Reference

Bentley, J W, E R Boa, P Van-Mele, Juan Almanza, Daniel Vasques and Steve Eguino. 2004. *Going Public: a new extension method*. International Journal of Agricultural Sustainability 1 (2):108-123.