

Farmer organisations offer ICT solutions

Farmer organisations are an ideal medium for delivering ICT-based services to improve farmers' incomes, and expand their markets

Farmer organisations (FOs) play a key role helping farmers in Africa and Asia to empower themselves. They give poor and illiterate farmers a voice. One thing all FOs have in common is their commitment to a common aim and their effort to maintain continuous contact with members. The effectiveness of an FO depends on its having a strong communication channel. While traditional means of communication are important, technology has a major role to play in enhancing the scale of services that FOs can offer to their members. Indeed, ICT4Ag can be a major enabler for FOs.

Despite the key role that FOs play in the lives of their members, farmers still face several challenges, which, once removed, will go a long way to improving their lives. Access to timely and relevant information in villages, many of which are remote and inaccessible, is expected to empower rural citizens. Increasing awareness and knowledge through information on government schemes and welfare measures can improve the quality of living in rural areas. FOs have been striving to address these issues but often through conventional means. ICTs are a sure-fire way to complement, and in many situations surpass, the effectiveness of conventional means.

Initiatives in India and Kenya

FOs can deliver ICT-based services. The situation would be win-win for all:

farmers would benefit from being able to use the services. FOs would find a means to engage more deeply with their constituents, while service providers would benefit from having achieved their basic objective.

One recent successful initiative is the Indian Farmers Fertiliser Cooperative Limited (IFFCO). The IFFCO cooperative has more than 40,000 cooperative societies as members. IFFCO's estimated reach is thought to be 50 million farmers, who own IFFCO through the share contribution system of their respective societies, as well as the consumers of the fertilizers produced by IFFCO's various plants. Apart from distributing quality fertilizer to farmers through the cooperative societies, IFFCO also organises various promotional activities so that farmers can learn about the latest technology in agriculture.

To more effectively leverage technology for the benefit of farmers, IFFCO launched a joint venture called IFFCO Kisan Sanchar Ltd (IKSL) in 2007 with Star Global Resources and Bharti Airtel. IKSL's mission is to empower Indian farmers by converting the ubiquitous mobile phone into a powerhouse of knowledge. IKSL uses mobile phone technology to provide timely agro-advisory services to farmers to improve income and yield and reduce cost and wastage. The agricultural advisories are provided as voice messages in local languages to ensure that even illiterate farmers can benefit from the services.

The IKSL model is based on the idea of engaging with farmers by showing them how to use their mobile phones in two new ways. The 'PUSH' approach ensures that farmers receive the latest relevant updates. The information is provided in the form of one-minute voice messages in the pertinent local

dialect. These voice messages are provided free of charge to IKSL Green Card subscribers. The 'PULL' approach enables farmers to call a helpline for extra information about the data they have been provided with or seek solutions for their specific problems. This example shows how farmer organisations have managed to effectively use ICT4Ag provided by a service provider.

In Kenya, the Eastern Africa Farmer Federation (EAFF) is working on bringing together different service providers providing various mobile applications on different aspects of the different value chains for the purposes of creating complete clusters of these providers. In partnership with a private investor, EAFF have embarked on developing a virtual platform similar to the one run by IFFCO for the purpose of linking farmers to both input and output markets as well as making them access credit and insurance products tailor-made for them. EAFF has already developed a prototype and is currently planning a pilot phase that will initially start in Kenya targeting the rice and maize value chains.

Once the pilot is finalised, and after its analysis and evaluation, EAFF plans to roll it out commercially with a target of more than 100,000 farmers in the first year. EAFF intends to continuously engage IKSL and is organising an exchange visit to IKSL to learn first-hand how they make their mobile platform work and use their expertise to make EAFF's platform work as well. Technology has the potential to unleash a revolution in the agriculture sector, especially because it will transcend the architecture of fragmentation that is characteristic of smallholder agriculture in Africa and Asia, and develop a financial history of the farmers, thereby making them creditworthy. ◀

More than mobile

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