



BRIEFING NOTE N^o 12
ON:

Current Status and Achievements of Linking Local Learners as a Knowledge Management Strategy for Rural Areas in East Africa

Linking Local Learners (LLL) is a learning environment which combines face-to-face action learning with online peer-to-peer sharing of ideas. Local learning groups of some ten to twenty people who live and work in the same place use this learning environment to improve their own activities and realize their future visions. They exchange their ideas and experiences with similar groups in other places online. They also coach and advise each other as peers on how they can be more successful in their activities. Linked local learning groups make progress because they pool their 'doledge,' or competencies to do things, with so many others. Collectively, linked local learning groups form a virtual knowledge network.

The learners, who they are and where they are from

Linking Local Learners (LLL), the internet learning support platform¹, currently has some one hundred and seventy six registered learners in its three virtual "Communities of Practice"². The largest COP "Demand Driven Service" is shared by eighty eight members who are improving the practice of establishing demand driven agricultural services to small farmers. It operates in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania where demand driven services have become a key agricultural policy for their governments. Operating in the same countries the smallest COP "Information and Communication Enterprises" has thirty two members improving the practice of setting up and running local internet cafés and farmer news services. "First Mile", the second largest COP, has fifty six members whose practices is improving market linkages. It only operates in Tanzania. The table below provides a breakdown of each COP showing which organizations the members belong to and where they are working.

COP	Country	Location	#	Organizations ³
Demand Driven Services	Kenya	Mount Kenya region	5	KENFAP, farmers
		Lake region	5	KENFAP, farmers
		Kakamega, Busia, Bungoma, Western region	7	Farmer Field Schools
	Uganda	Masaka, Tororo, Pallisa, Kabarole Rakai	6	DATICS
		Mpigi, Iganga	6	UNFFE
		Pallisa, Busia	8	Farmer Field Schools
		Soroti Busia	7	NAADS
	Tanzania	Morogoro region	5	MAFS, farmers
		Kagera region	3	Farmer Field Schools
		Iringa region	6	MAFS
Mbeya region		5	MAFS	
Information and Communication Enterprises	Kenya	Mount Kenya region	5	KENFAP, farmers
		Lake region	5	KENFAP, farmers
	Uganda	Masaka, Tororo, Pallisa, Kabarole Rakai	6	DATICS
		Mpigi, Iganga	6	UNFFE
First Mile	Tanzania	Arusha region, Tanga region	15	AMSDP
		Rukwa, Mbeya, Iringa, Ruvuma regions	19	AMSDP

Every learner registered on the LLL platform interacts with their own local network of learners both within and outside their own organization. This is particularly true of the farmers who are all leaders of farmer organizations or networks. Local learning groups are supported by resource persons either from their own organizations or from among their peers. Within the region learners can draw upon some forty seven resource persons, seven in Kenya, fifteen in Uganda and twenty five in Tanzania.

¹ The internet learning support software underpinning the LLL platform at www.linkinglearners.net is provided by Ideso (www.ideso.ch) and continually modified in response to feedback from the learners. The set of internet learning tools are referred to here as a learning platform.

² A Community of Practice or "COP" is defined as a diverse group of people separated by large geographical distances engaged in trying out new ideas over a period of time to improve a predefined practice that they are all passionate about.

³ KENFAP Kenya Farmers Union, UNFFE Uganda Farmers Union, DATICS District Agricultural Training and Information Centres, NAADS National Agricultural Advisory Service.

What practices they are improving

Every Community of Practice on the LLL platform sets its own learning agenda through expressions of member's interests. Simply put learners only engage in discussions and share ideas on topics that interest them.

Currently, the "First Mile" COP is discussing how to improve market linkages in the following commodities: Maize, Paddy, Wheat, Cheese, Oranges, and Tomato. There are also discussions on warehouse receipt systems and how to get credit. A discussion among farmer groups on how they are organized has also started in this COP. Earlier discussions that appear to have run their course focused on how to organize district learning groups, how to improve internet access and how to get market chains started.

The "Demand Driven Services" COP started out discussing how local learning groups could organize themselves, how services could be made more effective, how farmers can create 'effective' demand, and the importance of changing mindsets of both farmers and government extension agents and managers. Over time new topics emerged prompted largely by the interests of farmers. These topics included: how to sustain farmer groups; how farmers' can raise funds; how farmer organizations can become stockists; and how farmers can better access markets and technical advice. These discussions quickly led to new discussions on how to improve information flows to farmers and how farmers and service providers' can get better access to ICTs and the internet. These topics are also the main areas of learning in the "Information and Communication Enterprises" COP.

The "Information and Communication Enterprises" COP focuses its discussions on just two practices: sharing information from farmer to farmer; and how farmer groups and service providers can start up and run their own internet café and farmer news service.

Achievements So Far

Within a few months ten out of the eighteen AMSDP districts teams and local key players in the market chain had organized themselves into local learning groups. In under a year their practice of improving market linkages significantly increased incomes for producers and other key players through reducing transaction costs, avoiding exploitation and opening up new opportunities.

Impact for the farmers and service providers in the "Demand Driven Services" COP arrived just as quickly. Income increases resulted from self help among farmers and partnerships with local service providers to: extend hillside terraces for potato production, gain access to potato markets, secure loans for zero grazing dairy enterprises, make repairs to feeder roads and upgrade water supplies. The Livestock Stakeholders Association, LISSA increased incomes for all its members along a market chain they developed from Massai pastoralists through abattoir and butchers to consumers in Nairobi's slum.

The COP on "Information and Communication Enterprises" evolved from a the idea that information flows to farmers must be organized through formal public bodies like District offices and Farmer Unions to realize that commercialization of information services is the way forward. Already one internet café has been set up in Kilosa at www.kilosaruralservices.com from which the other COP members are learning.

Developing a mechanism for a new development dialogue

Farmers have always talked with each other as have service providers talked with their colleagues. Rarely, however, have these discussions spread beyond those they meet every day. The LLL internet platform has not only enabled many more farmers and service providers to talk to each other over large distances, it has also brought a structure and focus to those discussions. More minds, focus, structure and some mentoring have brought new ideas and better ways of working into the practice of development. The new development dialogue is between local peers. This dialogue proves to be highly interesting for development managers and donors since it provides them an entirely different line of inquiry. Three examples illustrate this point.

- 1) Farmers and service providers struggle, not quite equally, to get access to our internet learning platform. They have tested public, private and NGO points of access to conclude that private cafés best meet their needs. In the process they have also discovered that 'commercial' providers are far more ready and able to capture and use the learning networks they have set up.
- 2) The local experience of getting access to the internet has spawned a new idea. The current importance of SMS text messages for rural communication points to the need of incorporating SMS into internet based learning platforms.
- 3) Peer-to-peer dialogue, when encouraged to develop in a locally relevant way, moves towards matters concerning income and enterprise, as opposed to just production. Farmer groups want to learn both how to make more money from their produce and start new service enterprises. Profit not learning per se is a prime motivator for investing time in a COP.

For more information send your email to:
clive.lightfoot@linkinglearners.net
uscheuermeier@dplanet.ch
kevin.gallagher@fao.org