

## Module 7 /// Innovative Activity Profile 4

### Tanzania: The First Mile<sup>1</sup>

The First Mile Project was designed to complement the Agricultural Marketing Systems Development Program (AMSDP) of the government of Tanzania.<sup>2</sup> AMSDP is a seven-year program to increase rural poor peoples' food security and incomes by improving the structure and performance of the country's crop marketing systems. The project was funded by the Swiss government, and technical assistance was provided by the International Support Group.<sup>3</sup>

#### What is innovative?

The First Mile Project incorporates an Internet-based learning service that encourages the flow of information among key players in the market chain. The project assessed the availability of communication technologies and the willingness of people to use them and found that the ability to communicate over long distances was not as important to them as the usefulness of the information the technologies would make available.

The project piloted the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in an attempt to facilitate access to knowledge and information for small-scale producers, mostly women, so that they could improve their response to market opportunities. The description that follows uses excerpts from Web-based IFAD documents the

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<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.ifad.org/rural/firstmile/>.

<sup>3</sup> An international nonprofit association of communication and rural development registered in The Netherlands. Contacts: [hmcarthu@hawaii.edu](mailto:hmcarthu@hawaii.edu), [rramirez@uoguelph.ca](mailto:rramirez@uoguelph.ca), [mefernandezme@gmail.com](mailto:mefernandezme@gmail.com).

addresses of which can be found in the footnotes. The text is complemented from information from the gender analysis done of the project (Pagali, Nyimbo, and Swai 2007).

#### Project Objectives

The project is exploring how ICTs such as mobile phones, e-mail, and the Internet can help small farmers, processors, traders, and others in the market chain as they learn to work and think collaboratively, not competitively, to build fairer and more-efficient market relationships. It has been clear from the outset that the crucial ingredient for success is not the introduction of ICTs; rather, it is the willingness of local people to work together to share information and learning about markets. The challenge for the First Mile Project during the two-year pilot project was to work out how small farmers can connect through intermediaries to the Internet to get market information and to communicate with other groups—farmers, processors, traders, and consumers—as they build their own producer-to-consumer market chains.

In mid-2005 the First Mile Project started working with small farmers in parts of Tanzania to improve their access to markets and market information using ICTs. The project tackled two main challenges: (1) access by rural poor people to relevant information and knowledge and to communication technologies such as mobile phones, the Internet and e-mail, and (2) their access to other key people in the market chain, including processors, traders and consumers.

The project set out to facilitate learning among local groups to improve market linkages, generate locally developed good practices in building markets, and empower small farmers to get access to information and communication technologies (ICTs), based on their own needs.

The project built on the foundations of the AMSDP, and particularly on its work to strengthen the organization, leadership, and financial management of producer groups. The core groups set up by the AMSDP to implement its activities in the districts were crucial in enabling the First Mile team to reach farmers. In some districts the core groups became the intermediaries, helping farmers negotiate with

others in the market chain and helping them share and develop ideas over the Internet.

### **Innovative Features and Impacts**

At the onset, the project assessed current access by local people to information and communication technologies (ICTs) and explored their interest in working together to learn about market chains. Small farmers, processors, and traders attended an initial workshop in Arusha to explore the challenges they face in marketing. They showed a strong interest in working together and agreed that they would all gain from more cooperation along the market chain. Learning groups were formed that would eventually use e-mail and the Internet to share information, experience, and learning. A second workshop trained 28 people in the development of market chains and in how to support local learning as a way to improve market linkages. Their role is now to respond to demand and train others locally in the same skills.

A study conducted in June 2005, during the project's exploratory phase, found that there are no technical reasons why producers and other key players in the market chain could not contact each other regularly by using mobile phones to call or send text messages and, to a lesser extent, by using e-mail. The bigger problem is not access to the technology, which is closer and more accessible than it seemed at first, but whether people feel the exchange of information is valuable enough to justify the cost.

According to the study, rural people in Tanzania are discovering that even ICTs such as e-mail and the Internet are not beyond their reach, and they are interested in using them to communicate across distances. However, the quality of the information, especially its relevance and usefulness, is crucial. People interviewed for the study said they were not prepared to spend time, let alone money, to use technology to communicate unless the information was very worthwhile. The study underlined that effective communication is not only about laying cables, constructing microwave towers, and opening Internet cafés; it relies on creating networks of people with relevant information to share.

A core part of the First Mile Project is an Internet-based learning support service that will allow the learning groups to share information and knowledge about their successes and failures, hold discussions, and build their own library of local best practices. The service also provides online mentoring. The service, Linking Local Learners (<http://www.linkinglearners.net>) enables groups who live far apart and have little or no physical contact to talk about their experiences and challenges and share their expertise and ideas through a learning community of practice. It is also open to project staff, partners, donors, and others interested in the learning and best practices emerging from the interaction of the small producers, processors, traders, and others participating in the initiative. Information sharing could, for example, take place between farmers, or between farmers and traders, or farmers and civil servants. The service allows them to pool their knowledge so they can learn from each other's experiences and make their knowledge available as a common resource.<sup>4</sup>

By implication, gender mainstreaming is one of the project objectives since it forms part of the AMSDP strategies for producer empowerment and market linkages. Every partner agency (firm or NGO facilitating group formation or strengthening market linkages) is obliged to incorporate gender issues and achieve a 40 percent target for women beneficiaries. Most of the producers in the program areas are women.

While the program targeted 40 percent women beneficiaries, the Mid-Term Review mission found that this target was surpassed. At the same time, women form the most significant achievement on equity where they dominate a number of group leadership positions. Female group members lead about 20 percent of all the 647 groups. Program interventions, including the First Mile Project have enhanced women's access to market through brokered deals. For example, in Mbarali district, where men initially dominated cattle marketing, women were linked to Comorian cattle traders. They are now doing lucrative business through their group known as "Emanyatta" and have

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<sup>4</sup> Linked <http://www.ifad.org/rural/firstmile/>, <http://www.ifad.org/events/wsis/phase2/factsheet/c.pdf>.

improved their houses and changed their lifestyles generally as a result.

## **Lessons Learned**

The study underlined the advantages of working in groups. Small farmers who were members of local producers groups were more likely to have regular access to information that would help them improve production, solve problems, and get information on prices at the local market. They were already sharing information and knowledge with fellow producers, and they were also more likely to be using mobile phones. Some groups had invested in a mobile phone for shared use by members.

For Vincon Nyimbo, agricultural marketing specialist and coordinator of the market linkages component for the AMSDP, the long-term result is strong farmer organizations that can plan and develop new and more profitable enterprises, building on better information about markets and collaboration with others in the market chain.

The main findings of the study were that:

- Mobile phones are increasingly and more widely used in rural areas as coverage extends throughout the country.
- Access to mobile phones does not equal ownership—shared ownership and use of commercial pay-for-use services are common.
- Radio is widely used as a source of information and entertainment, but many people feel it does not provide adequate agricultural and market information.
- Most people have seen but have never used a computer.
- Many people have heard of e-mail and the Internet but have never used them.

## **References**

Pagali, A., V. Nyimbo, and W. Swai. 2007. "First Mile Project and Gender. Agricultural Marketing Systems Development Programme, Dar es Salaam."