Today, the world is going through extreme changes as Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) are entering almost all fields of human activities. There are few areas that are actually beyond ICTs influence.

In Africa, the largest increase in the use of ICTs has been in mobile telephones. In Tanzania as well, the mobile phone market is growing in a steadfast manner. It has been strong and continues to grow. Predictably, if this is accompanied by farmers with positive economic impact, the results could be extraordinary. The story below stems from the findings by a project funded by EPINAV (Enhancing Pro-Poor Innovations in Natural Resources and Agricultural Value-Chain) titled “The role of mobile phones towards improving coverage of agricultural extension services, a case study of maize value chain” in Kilosa district, Morogoro, Tanzania.

**Background information**

At present, the communication linkage between agricultural stakeholders in Tanzania is by and large top-down where passing of information is through extension workers. Large geographical distances are major hindrances. Noticeably, the growth of extension officers in most areas, Kilosa in particular, has not matched the number of farmers in need for these services.
Situation in Kilosa

Lack of timely agricultural information is a big problem and a constraint to small-scale agricultural producers in Kilosa District. However, there are some opportunities in the area which if tapped may perhaps address the issue.

Such opportunities include the presence of the Kilosa Rural Services and Electronic Centre (KIRSEC) which provides agricultural news to different communities in Kilosa district. Lack of funds and non-reliable electric power, however, makes it difficult to support all customers. Another opportunity is a telecenter with the prime goal to demonstrate the use of ICTs in disseminating and communicating agricultural information and knowledge to farmers and other stakeholders. But, high costs limit its utility and sustainability. In addition, farmer radio is present, but what content to present on air, the lack of subsidy from the government and poor coverage are reasons for its failure.

For farmers and consumers, illiteracy or ignorance has been the biggest problem and middlemen benefit a lot from this (i.e. fake products have entered markets, poor linkages with other maize actors, weak links with researchers etc.).

It is from this reality that the project is trying to see if mobile phones could connect these different stakeholders in maize value chains in an interpersonal relation level for fast, easy and flexible agricultural information sharing despite distance and extension service troubles.

Why mobile phones

As indicated above, the largest increase in the use of ICT has been in mobile phones. Mobile phones have penetrated even the rural areas. Therefore, the researchers are investigating whether mobile phones really can create an opportunity to address the problem of poor coverage of agricultural extension services to maize farmers in the study area, as well as the role of mobile phones in improving coverage of agricultural extension services in Tanzania.

Mlozi, project leader, elaborating on the role of mobile phones to a farmer in Kilosa

The project is still in its early stages and, so far has covered the following activities: exploratory visits, stakeholder analysis, and baseline survey data collection. Through these stages of implementation it has been realized that the current communication processes in maize value chains are not smooth enough and only benefit some actors while other farmers are being marginalized. The main reason for not benefiting is poor linkage.

A number of actors were identified but these were not well linked and connected as a single system. The actors identified were: farmers, extension officers, processors, trainers, researchers, farmer
radio, the tele-centre, input suppliers, middlemen/traders, Local Government Authority (LGAs) and policy makers. Due to the complexity of the maize market, the different stakeholders should pay attention to the outcome of this research so that well-organized information flows can be created within and between the different actors.

While examining the dynamics of the maize value chain, the researchers are paying particular attention to the practical needs and access to and control of information amongst the different actors. Based on this, the project will develop mechanisms through which mobile phones could easily and flexibly help maize actors access extension services.

The findings of the project will provide possible areas of intervention in the study area and in Tanzania at large. This intervention could be done by a multitude of stakeholders, for instance farmers, researchers such as those from the EPINAV programme or SUA staff, or the Tanzanian Government and policy makers through Local Government Authority (LGAs) and the Ministry of Agriculture, Food Security and Cooperatives. Depending on the identified audiences, different types of communication channels to disseminate findings have been proposed by the project. These include flyers/brochures/posters, CDs, DVDs, radio, free mobile calls and SMS (for farmers, extension workers and researchers), websites, newsletters articles and pod-casts.

**Lessons learned**
Continuous communication between the stakeholders involved in the research project is crucial for its success. Equally, attention is needed for this very promising undertaking. So, let’s join hands in the effort to make the research fruitful!

Project title: The role of mobile phones towards improving coverage of agricultural extension services, a case study of maize value chain

For more information go to
http://www.suanet.ac.tz/epinav/

Written by:
Siwel Yohakim Nyamba
SUA Department of Agricultural Education and Extension
December 2012