



INNOVATION FUND

Digital Connectors accelerating extension services to farming communities in Kenya and Uganda

Parent project: Strengthening agricultural knowledge and the innovation ecosystem for inclusive rural transformation and livelihoods in Eastern Africa (AIRTEA)



PROJECT COORDINATOR

Project Coordinator African Forum for Agricultural Advisory Services (AFAAS), Uganda



PARTNERS

Ag-Connectors, the Netherlands
Uganda Forum for Agricultural Advisory Services (UFAAS), Uganda
Forum for Agricultural Advisory Services - Kenya (KeFAAS), Kenya



LOCATION

Kenya (Muranga county),
Uganda (Bugiri and Luweero districts)



PERIOD

March 2022 – August 2024



EU FUNDING

EUR 279,881.78

SECTOR

Agriculture

KEYWORDS

Digital connector, value chains, market linkages, private-led systems, management information system, farming communities, smallholder farmers, innovation platform



PROJECT CONTACT

Mr. Max Olupot

African Forum for Agricultural Advisory Services (AFAAS)
House No. 26, Kigobe Road - Ntinda, Ministers' Village
P.O. Box 34624, Kampala
Uganda

molupot@afaas-africa.org
info@afaas-africa.org
www.afaas-africa.org

AIRTEA contact

Mr Kwaku Antwi
Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa (FARA)
kantwi@faraafrica.org

if@oacps-ri.eu
www.oacps-ri.eu

CHALLENGE

African agriculture is facing a triple challenge of feeding nutritious and affordable food to a growing population (gradually concentrating into urban centres), adjusting to climate change and developing environmental services (such as regenerative or landscape agriculture), and providing jobs for a vast number of youth. Farming communities are lacking information about how to tackle these challenges, due to limited access to quantitative and qualitative content and low literacy of farmers, limited availability of extension services to package information into actionable solutions, and limited levels of efficient organisation of production and access to markets. The digital divide, characterised by low connectivity due to high cost of data packages and low digital literacy, hampers the access to content available on the Internet.



Benchmarking visit of farmers from Vihiga county on agro-ecological vegetable production at the Gathinja Organic Farm, Kiharu Constituency Murang'a County, Kenya

Consequently, communities have stayed off digital platforms or services because of low credibility and insufficient availability of content in multiple local languages, and insufficient service providers and organisations to make these relevant to their needs.

PERSPECTIVES

The project focuses on inclusion of women and youth into economic activities that will contribute to the digitalisation of extension services leading to resilient agri-food systems. They are trained and supported to become 'Digital Connectors' providing advisory services to smallholder farmers with the support of ICT through a sustainable business model. They will bridge the last mile in agricultural extension utilising a mix of online and offline services and making strong connections and networks with the private sector - providers of ICT / digital solutions and content - and policy makers while taking into account the endogenous knowledge of farming communities into their adoption of digital solutions.

JUSTIFICATION

Tailored knowledge is required by smallholder farmers to upgrade their agricultural practices towards innovative precision agriculture or agro-ecological practices.

Rural women and youth are in need of economic and social inclusion and have the ability to harness content into actionable solutions to their communities through innovative extension services. Embeddedness into multi-stakeholder mechanisms, such as innovation platforms, where policy makers take part, can favour the sustainability of these services and the scaling of the solutions.





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METHOD

The project enhances digital literacy of farmers through the provision of digital-based services by rural youth and women equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to become 'Digital Connectors' in the domain of agricultural extension and advisory services. It also contributes to the sustainability and scaling of these services through embedding them in farming communities and innovation platforms, supporting them with business development opportunities, and harnessing lessons and best practices to inform public policies and strategies.



Installation of irrigation equipment by a digital connector on a farm that is member of the Zirobwe Agaliawamu Agri-business Training Association (ZAABTA), an innovation platform in Zirobwe, Luweero District, Central Uganda

Building the Digital Connectors' capacity

- Identification of potential digital connectors.
- Business development training of digital connectors on entrepreneurial skills and knowledge to develop their own individual business models around a chosen area of interest for improved agricultural practices.
- Coaching and mentoring of digital connectors.
- Validation of business models.
- Provision of financial and material resources to digital connectors.

Embedding Digital Connectors

- Participatory capacity and needs assessment of smallholder farmers on pre-season and in-season agricultural practices, and access to sales and financial markets.
- Provision of services to communities,
- Development of knowledge products and services for farming communities,
- Dialogue with policy makers.

This comprehensive approach enables the Digital Connectors to proficiently use digital tools and nurture their potential as entrepreneurs and facilitators in agricultural extension. The coaching, mentoring and capacity building components ensure their ownership of robust business models, building their trust and that of their community to use their services.

EXPECTED RESULTS

Impact

- Improved livelihood of farming communities in Kenya (Muranga county) and Uganda (Bugiri and Luweero districts).

Outcome

- Rural women and youths active as Digital Connectors along agricultural value chains.
- Farming communities using innovative production and post-harvest practices and technologies.
- Public policymakers creating an enabling policy environment for promoting digital services along agricultural value chains.

Outputs

- Enhanced business skills of Digital Connectors along agricultural value chains.
- Farming communities accessing digital Agricultural Extension and Advisory Services (AEAS).
- Public policymakers engaged in digital services in agricultural value chains.

INNOVATIVENESS

The concept of deploying specialised Digital Connectors is new in Africa. It provides a dual innovation: a technological one based on the development of digital-based or digital-aided services that complements more traditional ones such as sales of inputs and equipment, and a behavioural one based on the expanded usage of services provided by Digital Connectors within farming communities.

Moreover, the introduction of paid-for services, including farming manuals and guides made accessible through platforms like websites, combined with the supply of various inputs to farmers, such as quality seedlings, irrigation equipment and post-harvest packing material, ensure viable businesses for women and youth agripreneurs and tailor-made extension and advisory services to smallholder farmers.



AIRTEA is implemented by FARA in partnership with ASARECA and EAFF. **AIRTEA** fosters an inclusive research and innovation environment towards sustainable agrarian livelihoods and rural transformation, through: strengthening the production, processing and marketing capacities of youth and women in East Africa's multi-stakeholder value chain innovation platforms and women in East Africa's multi-stakeholder value chain innovation platforms and linking them to practical solutions within national, regional and global food systems; facilitating the transfer of technologies, knowledge and innovations, and their uptake through multi-stakeholder learning routes; and improving profitability and employment opportunities along agricultural commodity value chains by establishing national and regional Agricultural Business Learning Alliance (ABLA) platforms, business development services and mentorship.

AIRTEA supports 11 projects in Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda that focus on agricultural production, processing, marketing, agricultural digital application development, and extension (mainly aquaculture, dairy, and horticulture).

