

‘Duplicate and unavailable’: How the internet bypasses Ugandan farmers

By [Jennifer Bakyawa](#)

1 Jan 2005

When Uganda joined the internet bandwagon less than a decade ago, it had hopes of delivering important information to farmers. It hasn't worked out that way because much of the information bypasses farmers, who are often too poor to access the internet, and there is a general lack of coherence in the way the information is presented.

KAMPALA - Less than a decade ago, Uganda – along with scores of other developing countries – began using the internet as a means of delivering agricultural information to farmers. But there is increasing evidence that the technology still remains beyond the reach of many farmers.

In the late 1990s, it seemed like a good idea – and a cheap one too – to extend the internet to rural Uganda. Several donors enthusiastically jumped on the internet bandwagon and funded websites and telecentres catering to farmers.

Experts argued that improving farmers' access to the latest agricultural information through modern technologies would increase agricultural production – armed with information on markets and what price to ask, farmers could decide what crops to grow, which in turn increased their power to bargain for better prices.

Across the country, telecentres were established – a typical centre had 1 or 2 computers and telephone lines set up in a small room. Farmers had to pay to be members.

Unorganised information

Now a paper written by researchers at the International Institute for Communication and Development in The Hague, Holland says that although the internet has “drastically changed” the information landscape, information is scattered across the internet and not organised in a way most relevant to farmers.

The targeted users, such as small farmers, often have problems finding and accessing relevant information in usable formats, the researchers say.

Emily Arayo, media liaison officer at the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA), a non-governmental organisation in Kampala agrees: “Most information exchange is between research scientists. It is information for researchers, policy makers and decision-makers. For farmers the information needs to be broken down to what is directly relevant to them.”

The paper, *Fertile Grounds: Opportunities For Greater Coherence In Agricultural Information Systems* with case studies of Ghana, Tanzania and Uganda, says, “International services do not always link with national information networks, and therefore information is either duplicated, not available or cannot be found by the intended audience.”

“We are not kidding ourselves that farmers are using the internet – we know they are not!” says Emmet Murphy, deputy programme manager of ACDI-VOCA (Agricultural Cooperative Development International-Volunteers in Overseas Cooperative Assistance), an international non-profit development group that provides technical assistance, training and support in agriculture.

Over 80 per cent of Uganda’s population is engaged in agriculture.

The paper notes that many current service providers maintain data collections which tend to exist in isolation from complementary services provided by others. The government’s National Agricultural Research Organisation, for instance, has an outreach initiative which aims at making direct contact with farmers’ groups, but it is not working with the IITA which is helping farmers set up such groups.

This lack of collaboration in the agricultural sector, it says, has led to a large quantity of unlinked information systems. As a result, some projects have lost momentum and a number of websites and online databases have become empty, without up-to-date content.

It is not as if the internet is not serving rural Uganda. ACDI-VOCA sponsors a website called Foodnet – run by the IITA – which has post-harvest and market research information on 28 key commodities. The information itself comes from IITA workers, who collect data from the main district markets and sub-county markets.

The IITA also prepares radio scripts and chat-shows for farmers which are broadcast on local radio stations. The IITA radio service and Foodnet currently cover 32 of Uganda’s 56 districts.

Language, literacy and electricity

The problem, says Kevin Semmanda, senior information scientist in the Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries, is that most farmers do not have direct access to the Internet: “The telecentres have had little impact. Very few farmers have the means and knowledge of accessing the Internet.” If you are not a paid member, you have to pay for each visit.

Arayo says farmers normally get the information they need from secondary sources such as extension workers, radio programmes and SMS messaging on their mobile phones. Given Uganda’s low literacy level (62 percent, according to the World Bank), it is very difficult for them to benefit directly from the internet. Besides, the main language of the internet is English, whereas there are some 20 indigenous local languages spoken in Uganda.

Moses Were, 33, a peasant farmer in Mukona district in central Uganda, acknowledges that the internet has uses – timely and accessible market information, he says, could help “eliminate many middlemen.” Were, who has been growing cocoa, vanilla and coffee for 10 years, is literate but cannot afford to buy a computer – and in any case, there is no electricity in his house.

Relying on alternative means of communication

Arayo says the National Agricultural Advisory Services, a government agency, regularly puts up farming information on notice boards at its sub-county offices, but admits there is no guarantee farmers will see it. It is far more useful for extension workers to collate information from Foodnet and deliver it to farmers.

Experts agree that the lack of access to information is directly related to rural poverty. But although the Ugandan government’s Plan for Modernisation of Agriculture identifies providing farmers with market information as a priority it does

not specify how this is to be done.

Joseph Mukasa Mpaga, a 72-year-old farmer, says he does not rely on the internet for market prices. There is only one internet kiosk in his village of Kasawo, some 120 km from Kampala, and he cannot afford to pay for it. Rather he and his colleagues get the latest market prices from other farmers returning from the Kampala market.

David Luwandagga, Kampala's data collector for the IITA maintains that reaching information from the internet is vital for all sorts of reasons – for instance, when farmers in a certain region learn that their counterparts elsewhere are receiving a better price because of the quality of their produce, they will try and achieve the same standards. It is also vital for building food security by sounding early warnings of drought.

At the moment, a variety of media appear to be servicing farmers' needs in Uganda – farmers in Masindi district in western Uganda refuse to sell their products to traders until they have listened to the radio bulletin about prices. Semmanda says rather than focussing on the internet alone, agricultural officers should also use video, music, drama and radio to strengthen the extension system.

“Radio moves faster than the internet,” agrees Arayo. “It also takes care of the language problem.”

This feature has been produced as part of the RELAY programme, which explores new ways of communicating development research through the media.

Research paper | Fertile Grounds: Opportunities For Greater Coherence In Agricultural Information Systems (International Institute for Communication and Development, December 2003)

This feature is published by courtesy of [Panos Features](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jennifer Bakyawa writes for *The Monitor*, a Ugandan newspaper.

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