

Organizing the learning for rural marketing through Linking Local Learners

How to improve small holder farmers' links to markets

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The Linking Local Learner methodology has been discussed before on RDN. Here is an account of how a large IFAD-supported program has planned to organize and implement the LLL process for rural marketing.

Poor links to markets

Most small farmers cannot get linked to markets at all. When they do their ignorance is exploited, so they do not get a fair share of the final consumer price. Lack of information and lack of power at the negotiation table (or effective exclusion from it) leaves them open to exploitation by other players in the market chain and particularly unregistered 'petty' traders. Farmers often respond to low prices by cheating which only adds further inefficiencies to marketing. Without better links to markets small farmers have very little chance of ever getting themselves out of poverty and staying out. Beyond the 'one-off' success story nobody really knows how to do this sustainably. However, many do know that for effective market linkage 'know-how' to emerge the principle players on the ground – farmers, market chain actors, service providers, and development managers in government, NGO's and donor projects will have to invent what works for them in their locality and in their specific circumstances.

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Filling the market linkage 'knowhow' gap will require a great deal of on the ground learning by many local actors on how to profitably deal with each other to mutual benefit. Local learning must also include key players in market chains: the processors and wholesalers, as well as the development managers in government offices and in donor projects.

New market access service enterprises

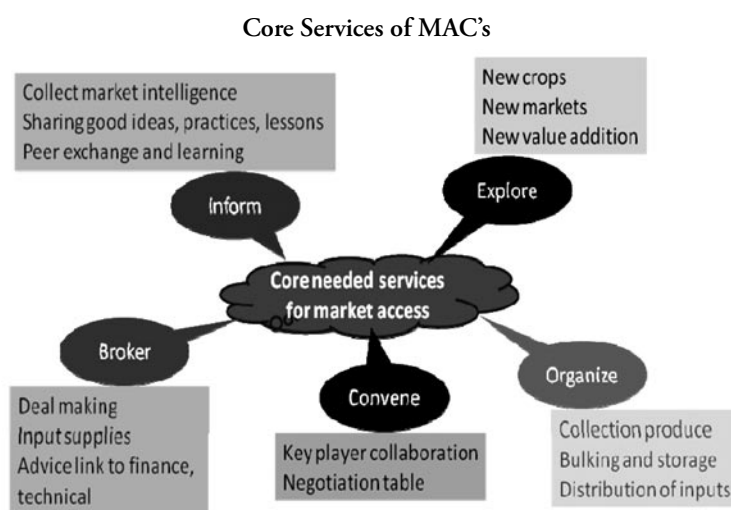
Over the last four years some two hundred local learners: farmers leaders, service providers in district councils, NGO's, Unions and farmer field schools, across Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania have been using the LLL methodology to improve small farmers access to agricultural services including marketing services. In 2006 many of those 'local learners' participating in the IFAD supported FAO-Farmer Field Schools, AMSDP-Firstmile and Knowledge Management Strategies projects (AMSDP Agricultural Marketing Support Development Project) came together in a series of assessment workshops where they observed that where small farmers had access to locally relevant market intelligence and brokering services their links to markets significantly improved.

The recent FAO RKN workshop (Rural Knowledge Network, Kampala 17th to 20st of April 2007) provided an opportunity for these local learners to further develop an operational strategy for the needed learning to occur. They envisaged key players in the market chain collaborating together made possible by the information and brokering services of a local, private, commercial Market Access Company (MAC). The operations of the MAC were in turn made possible by the back up or support services of a Private National Company (PNC).

The MAC offers brokering, organizing, negotiating and market intelligence services to producers and other market intermediaries (wholesalers and processors in particular) at the local level. The MAC is a commercially viable entity at the “District” level that is careful to avoid being drawn into trading itself in order to build the required trust-relationship with all players and become an honest broker. The main asset of the core services of MAC’s company is its network of trustful relationships which allows it to explore and develop a wide range of commodities and services for its clients. Services are not restricted to farming and could include ICT access through rentals of mobile phones and laptops as well as solar panels to charge batteries for mobiles, lights and laptops. The PNC is a backup company at the national level that will provide services to the MACs to be commercially successful. Services will include finding market opportunities, arranging financing and facilitating learning and operational research. The PNC is expected to be a commercially viable company, but will probably be a good private partner for Public Private Partnerships with public agencies.

Operational strategy to link farmers to markets

The emergence of these new market access service companies at local and national level will require a lot of ‘learning-by-doing’ under real commercial conditions. Therefore, farmers, intermediaries in market chains, and service providers in MAC’s and PNC’s all need to engage in action learning and peer-to-peer exchanges. This will require intense mentoring to ensure dynamic exchanges not only between peers on the same network but also between networks operating from local to national levels. The operational strategy envisages that action on the ground will be triggered by the demand among market players for services to link up and exploit opportunities for more efficient market chains. The MACs then provide these services locally and the PNC provides services to the MACs to be able to do so. The whole network of services is informed through a Rural Knowledge Network which



allows everyone to use the ‘Linking Local Learners’ knowledge pool to learn their way to fill the market linkage ‘know-how’ gaps.

Testing the strategy

Over the next two years the local learners in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania using the LLL methodology will test their operational strategy for improving small farmer links to markets. The ‘know-how’ gaps they have identified for themselves forms the learning agenda for this test as follows.

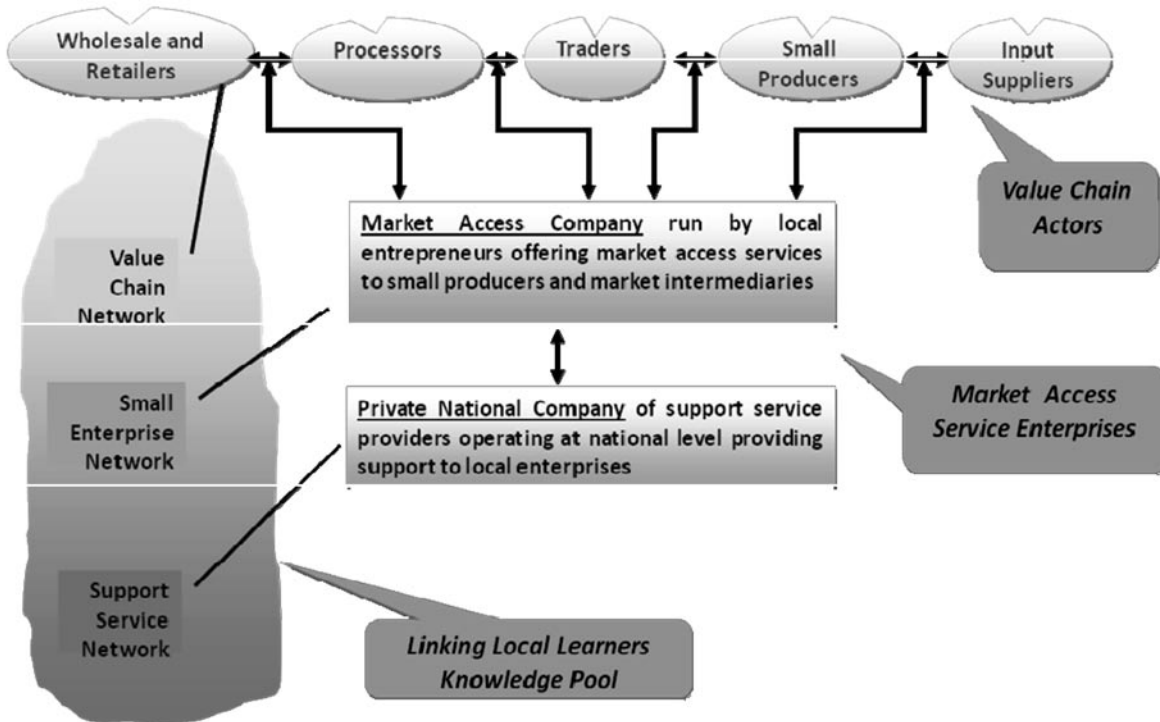
Farmers and other key players in the market chain need to learn how to:

- Collaborate rather than cheat to improve efficiency along the market chain.
- Develop trust between key players built on price discovery.
- Incorporate value adding technologies along the market chain.
- Communicate on time sensitive market intelligence.

Entrepreneurs in local service provision need to learn how to organize themselves to offer services on a commercial basis in the following areas:

- Exploring new crops, markets and value adding technologies.

Operational Strategy for a Rural Knowledge Network



- Organizing the collection, bulking and storage of produce and distribution of inputs.
- Convening key players for collaboration along the market chain.
- Brokering deals on crop sales, input supplies and links to sources of financial and technical support.
- Informing clients on market intelligence and facilitating peer exchange and learning.

- Exploring financing sources from private and public agencies including operations of private-public-partnerships.
- Networking to ensure documentation and exchange of experiences for learning across all participating local service provider enterprises.

Consultants in national support services need to learn how to organize themselves to offer services on a commercial basis in the following areas:

- Informing on market intelligence from national and international sources.
- Analysing market opportunities and innovating better procedures for cost effective service delivery.
- Identifying and meeting capacity building needs of local service providers.
- Ensuring good public relations making local services known locally and nationally.

How does learning happen: Online Mentoring LLL Style

The implementation of LLL in the East African rural marketing context is heavily dependent on online interaction, but cannot be done only online. How does one facilitate peer-exchange in an online environment? This article gives an account of the challenges of facilitating peer-exchange over the internet that can create synergies with face-to-face exchange events.

Observers of Linking Local Learners (LLL) often ask what online mentoring is all about. What do mentors do? How do mentors stimulate peer to peer exchanges over the internet? We always respond with pointing out that mentoring combines face to face as well as online exchanges. The combination of the two works better than just using one. Most people know about how to facilitate action learning processes on the ground. What mentors do online is what we explain here.

Making a difference on the ground drives online exchange

1. Brokering new deals between farmer groups and big buyers like wholesalers and processors is an experience many service providers are interested in. The experience of a small group of service providers supported by the AMSDP programme in Muheza Tanzania brokering oranges sparked off successful deal making among other service provider groups. Songea maize farmers, Babati rice farmers, Muheza black pepper and Sumbawanga simsim growers all made successful deals with Mohamed Enterprises and Dodoma Transport in Tanzania following Muheza.
2. The practice of collaboration along a market chain started with Lissa's meat marketing experience in Limuru, Kenya and moved to Mbinga in Tanzania. There wheat producer groups collaborated with Green House Investments wholesalers, Mbinga Diocese Wheat Millers and Mpemba bakery. This more efficient market chain benefited all players.
3. Similarly, the concept of "farmer market spies" moved quickly from Mufindi to be even more successfully reinvented in Babati, Tanzania. They combined market spies with village billboards and local market information centres.
4. The invention of higher level farmer associations for bulking and joint marketing emerged in Nyeri, Kenya and moved to Uganda and Tanzania. Soroti and Bushenyi now boast umbrella associations of honey, citrus, dairy, banana and sweet potato grower associations. In Mbeya, Tanzania, the Mbonzo Agricultural Marketing Cooperative Society has been set up for joint maize and bean sales. The innovators, Mount Kenya Producers Association, got sufficiently organized to successfully export snow peas to Europe.
5. Market access groups in Hai and Arumeru pioneered the introduction of new enterprises like mushrooms, flower seed and safflower. Such new enterprises spread not just to others in Tanzania but within the region as well. The Tujikomboe farmer group in Morogoro are following up with Hai service providers on mushrooms. The FFS network in Kakamega, Kenya started a new enterprise in Moringa oleifera, a medicinal plant, which Songea service providers want to learn about.
6. The successfully introduced Warehouse Receipt System of AMSDP in Mbeya and Babati districts has spread. Abuket sweet potato association in Soroti Uganda started exchanges to develop their own set up. They will not be identical systems. Indeed the groups are now in touch with a farmer initiated and owned system in Ruaha Mbuyuni, Tanzania.

Peer to peer exchange does not happen automatically

All these 'successful' experiences tell us that local learners do not copy each others practices or solutions. Rather they pick up on an idea and make up their

own practice to fit their own particular circumstances. Learning is not 'instructional' with a manual for others to follow. Rather, peers coach each other in a practice. Learners ask back questions and make their own practice for their own situation.

Experience tells us that learners do not engage with 'top down' outsider learning agendas. Rather they must decide what it is they want to learn today and be free to change it tomorrow. Learners will only put in the considerable efforts to learn and share if they are going to learn things that are crucially important to them. Even then some find it helpful to enter into a 'learning contract' with their peers to:

- Share any information that you find useful as others may also find it so.
- Share plans for trying out new ideas.
- Share information on achievements at each step of the way.
- Respond to the questions from other groups when you can.
- Aim for at least monthly exchange over the internet.

Experience tells us that peer-to-peer exchange does not happen automatically. It needs both a trigger to get started and a mentor to keep it going. What learners read online, what they discuss at workshops, or what they talk to each other about on the phone can be triggers. Mentors keep the learning going. They pose questions and present challenges. They coax ideas out as many do not have the skills to convey the richness of their experience. One Swahili speaker observed that in their farmer group "we like English because it makes us think more clearly about our problems and ideas".

What mentors do

As we said earlier mentors work face-to-face and online. They do facilitate workshops where learners exchange ideas, practices and achievements. They do facilitate the emergence of a 'common' learning agenda. After such workshops mentors keep the learning agenda moving by prompting for ideas and experiences, re-focusing the discussions and debates to move them forward: "where do we stand, what is the next ques-

tion". In addition to keeping the exchanges dynamic mentors must also:

- Pull discussion threads together and synthesize what has been learned.
- Clean up the threading of discussions for others to follow at a later date.
- Interview and coach learners to write up experiences and practices.
- Prompt learners to search and make contact with peers who have done interesting things.
- Connect learners with information and expertise outside their usual sources.
- Share news, stories, interviews, and practices through the 'linkinglearners' website.
- Update learners contact information keeping track of changing email addresses.

Mentors serve learners as coaches and networkers. Mentors use the Linking Local Learners methodology as it integrates learning by doing on the ground with online peer-to-peer exchange. They value the flexibility of being able to cope with rapidly changing learning topics. They value the transparency and open-access to the learning outcomes. Outcomes are shared through our website at www.linkinglearners.net. The methodology depends on organized exchanges of emails and pooling of knowledge online for which it uses the software called 'Instant Team'. Instant Team is 'open source' software for online exchange developed by Ideso (www.ideso.ch). Both methodology and internet software are well supported by training resources and can be replicated freely by anyone.