

Linking Local Learners: an approach to knowledge management for rural development

Clive Lightfoot and Ueli Scheuermeier¹

The Linking Local Learners approach

Linking Local Learners is a knowledge management strategy which combines face-to-face action learning with online peer-to-peer sharing of ideas. The learning strategy focuses more on peer-exchange as opposed to instructive training by outsiders. Local learning groups of some ten to twenty people who live and work in the same place use this strategy to improve their own activities and realize their future visions. An example of such a local network is shown in Figure 1. They exchange their ideas and experiences with similar groups in other places using an internet learning support platform at www.linkinglearners.net². They also coach and advise each other as peers on how they can be more successful in their activities. Linked local learning groups make progress because they pool their 'doledge' (analogous to knowledge) or competencies to do things, with so many others. Collectively, linked local learning groups form a virtual knowledge network³.

¹ Members of the LLL consortium, an informal collaboration between Lightfoot Consulting, UK; Agridea, Switzerland; and Idesso, Switzerland.

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² The internet learning support software underpinning the LLL platform at www.linkinglearners.net is provided by Ideso (www.ideso.ch) and continually modified in response to feedback from the learners. The set of internet learning tools are referred to here as a learning platform.

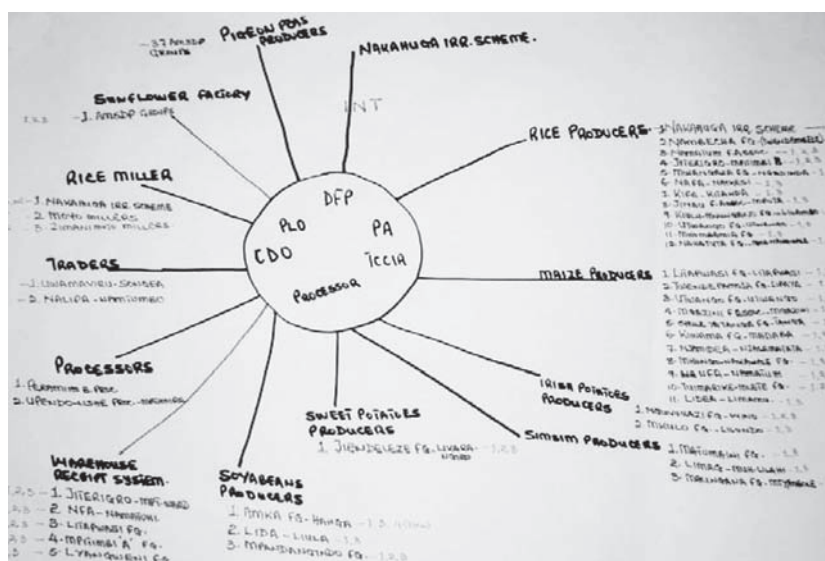


Figure 1. Songea core group knowledge network, Songea District, Tanzania. One of the twenty district networks in the Firstmile 'COP'.

Who are the learners and where are they from?

The internet learning support platform currently has some one hundred and seventy six registered learners in its three virtual "knowledge networks". The largest knowledge network "Demand Driven Service" is shared by eighty eight members who are improving the practice of establishing demand driven agricultural services to small farmers. It operates in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania where demand driven services

³ A virtual knowledge network is defined as a diverse group of people separated by large geographical distances engaged in trying out new ideas over a period of time to improve a predefined practice that they are all passionate about.

Table 1. Virtual knowledge networks on the LLL platform

VKN	Country	Location	# Local groups	Organizations ⁴
Demand Driven Services	Kenya	Mount Kenya region	5	KENFAP, farmers
		Lake region	5	KENFAP, farmers
		Kakamega, Busia, Bungoma, Western region	7	Farmer Field Schools
	Uganda	Masaka, Tororo, Pallisa, Kabarole Rakai	6	DATICS
		Mpigi, Iganga	6	UNFFE
		Pallisa, Busia	8	Farmer Field Schools
		Soroti Busia	7	NAADS
	Tanzania	Morogoro region	5	MAFS, farmers
		Kagera region	3	Farmer Field Schools
		Iringa region	6	MAFS
Mbeya region		5	MAFS	
Information and Communication Enterprises	Kenya	Mount Kenya region	5	KENFAP, farmers
		Lake region	5	KENFAP, farmers
	Uganda	Masaka, Tororo, Pallisa, Kabarole Rakai	6	DATICS
		Mpigi, Iganga	6	UNFFE
First Mile	Tanzania	Arusha region, Tanga region	15	AMSDP
		Rukwa region, Mbeya region, Iringa region, Ruvuma region	19	AMSDP

have become a key agricultural policy for their governments. Operating in the same countries the smallest knowledge network “Information and Communication Enterprises” has thirty two members improving the practice of setting up and running local internet cafés and farmer news services. “First Mile”, the second largest knowledge network, has fifty six members whose practice is improving market linkages. It only operates in Tanzania. Table 1 provides a breakdown of each virtual knowledge network showing which organizations the members belong to and where they are working.

Every learner registered on the LLL platform is representing a local learning group. The learners interact with their own local network of learners both within and outside their own organization. This is particularly true of the farmers who are all leaders of farmer organizations or networks. Local learning groups are supported by resource persons either from their own

organizations or from among their peers. Within the region learners can draw upon some forty seven resource persons, seven in Kenya, fifteen in Uganda and twenty-five in Tanzania. The authors provide online mentoring to the local facilitators in the three virtual knowledge networks. Training workshops in the LLL methodology reinforces the online mentoring.

What practices are the learners improving?

Every virtual knowledge network on the LLL platform sets its own learning agenda through expressions of member’s interests. To put it simply: learners only engage in discussions and share ideas on topics that interest them.

Currently, the “First Mile” knowledge network⁵ is discussing how to improve market linkages in the follow-

⁴ KENFAP Kenya Farmers Union, UNFFE Uganda Farmers Union, DATICS District Agricultural Training and Information Centres, NAADS National Agricultural Advisory Service, AMSDP Agricultural Marketing Systems Development Programme.

⁵ The “First Mile” project is funded by Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC) in collaboration with the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) funded Agricultural Marketing Systems Development Programme of the Government of Tanzania.

ing commodities: maize, paddy, wheat, cheese, oranges, and tomato. There are also discussions on warehouse receipt systems and how to get credit. A discussion among farmer groups on how they are organized has also started in this network. Earlier discussions focused on how to organize district learning groups, how to improve internet access and how to get market chains started.

The “Demand Driven Services” knowledge network⁶ started out discussing how local learning groups could organize themselves, how services could be made more effective, how farmers can create ‘effective’ demand, and the importance of changing mindsets of both farmers and government extension agents and managers. Over time new topics emerged prompted largely by the interests of farmers. These topics included: how to sustain farmer groups, how farmers’ can raise funds, how farmer organizations can become stockists, and how farmers can better access markets and technical advice. These discussions quickly led to new discussions on how to improve information flows to farmers and how farmers and service providers’ can get better access to ICTs and the internet. These topics are also the main areas of learning in the “Information and Communication Enterprises” virtual knowledge network.

The “Information and Communication Enterprises” knowledge network focuses its discussions on just two practices: sharing information from farmer to farmer and how farmer groups and service providers can start up and run their own internet café and farmer news service.

What kinds of impact on rural incomes have been achieved?

Within a few months ten out of the fourteen AMSDP districts teams and local key players in the market chain had organized themselves into local learning groups that call themselves “district core groups”. In the first

⁶ The “Knowledge Management Strategies” project funded by IFAD supports the „Demand Driven Services“ and „Information and Communication Enterprises“ networks.

Box 1. Methodology of Linking Local Learners

Linking local learners integrates methods for a local, face-to-face, action learning process as well as an internet supported peer-to-peer learning process. The **structured action learning process** takes local learners through analysing their present situation to generating their ideas to realize their future vision and finally to build the necessary partnerships for action. Reflecting on the impact of their actions takes learners full circle to a new situation and vision. In the case of “Demand Driven Services” local people develop future visions for their farms and villages and come up with actions and service demands to realize their visions. Service demands are matched with service providers and partnerships negotiated for joint action. In the practice of improving market linkages producers and other key players in the market chain visualize their present situation and future visions of producer to consumer market chains. Ideas for action to improve linkages and build market chains are identified, then the partnerships to start the work.

Peer-to-peer learning comprises of documenting ideas and experiences for sharing and engaging in asynchronous discussions over the internet. The internet learning support tools for discussion, searching, library, contacts and knowledge pooling at www.linkinglearners.net provide a learning platform for the virtual knowledge network. A prototype java application, the ‘firstmile questionnaire’, that allows learners to engage in the internet learning platform without being ‘online’ will, it is hypothesized, bring internet access to farmers and service providers who cannot visit internet cafés themselves as could the integration of SMS messaging with the internet.

season their practice of improving market linkages significantly increased incomes for producers and other key players through reducing transaction costs, avoiding exploitation and opening up new opportunities. The amount of crops marketed on average doubled and sometimes trebled. Incomes rose by ninety to nine hundred percent as shown in Table 2. The introduction of new commodities, safflower, sunflower and flower seeds has in the first season resulted in income increases for the producers involved of 38’400, 5’600 and 4’800 USD respectively.

Impact for the farmers and service providers in the “Demand Driven Services” network arrived just as quickly.

Income increases resulted from self help among farmers and partnerships with local service providers to: extend hillside terraces for potato production, gain access to potato markets, secure loans for zero grazing dairy enterprises, make repairs to feeder roads and upgrade water supplies. The Livestock Stakeholders Association, LISSA increased incomes for all its members along a market chain they developed from Massai pastoralists through abattoir and butchers to consumers in Nairobi's slum.

What development insights have emerged from this new development dialogue?

Farmers have always talked with each other as have service providers talked with their colleagues. Rarely, however, have these discussions spread beyond those they meet every day. The LLL internet platform has not only enabled many more farmers and service providers to talk to each other over large distances, it has also brought a structure and focus to those discussions. More minds, focus, structure and some mentoring have brought new ideas and better ways of working into the practice of development. The new development dialogue is between local peers. This dialogue proves to be highly interesting for development managers and

donors since it provides new insights on development. Three examples illustrate this point.

- 1) Farmers and service providers struggle, not quite equally, to get access to our internet learning platform. They have tested public, private and NGO points of access to conclude that private cafés best meet their needs. In the process they have also discovered that 'commercial' providers are far more ready and able to capture and use the learning networks they have set up.
- 2) The local experience of getting access to the internet has spawned a new idea. The current importance of SMS text messages for rural communication points to the need of incorporating SMS into internet based learning platforms.
- 3) Peer-to-peer dialogue, when encouraged to develop in a locally relevant way, moves towards matters concerning income and enterprise, as opposed to just production. Farmer groups want to learn both how to make more money from their produce and how to start new service enterprises. Profit not learning per se is a prime motivator for investing time in a COP.

Table 2. Impact of improve market linkages on marketed volume and producer income in Tanzania districts for August 2005–February 2006 season

District	Crop	Producer Groups	Member Nos.	Increase in Marketed Volume		Increases in Income '000	
				Tons	%	USD	%
Mbozi	Rice	Omekika	25	20	133 %	4.8	211 %
	Rice	Katukani	23	8	114 %	2.0	186 %
	Rice	Kiwamki	55	28	127 %	6.7	203 %
	Paprika	Upendo	35	2	211 %	1.9	211 %
Songea	Rice	Nakahuga irrigat	442	1'172	338 %	499.7	200 %
	Rice	Kifa Kitanda	375	202	28 %	544.5	100 %
	Maize	Shule ya Tanga	75	93	41 %	27.0	100 %
	Maize	Tuimarike Mlete	44	44	33 %	15.9	101 %
Mbeya	Maize	Mbonzo Amcos	54	1'450	73 %	626.5	90 %
	Potato	IRP	45	205	317 %	45.8	1'238 %
	Garlic	Upendo	40	2	162 %	2.0	500 %
	Coffee	Idugumbi Amcos	27	20	133 %	57.0	950 %

What future for knowledge management in rural development?

1) Achieving greater local relevance

There are far too few farmers, service providers and local government officials enjoying the benefits of being linked to a virtual knowledge network. Knowledge networks on matters of local importance result in changes of behaviour and ways of working that make a difference. Relevance of “local” information appears to be at the level of districts and local markets with regard to market information, and at the national level with regard to group procedures, learning strategies and alliance-building. How sustained these results are depends on the size of the local networks and the numbers of learners engaged. There is a critical mass above which enough locally relevant information is generated for learners to stay engaged. We do not yet know what this critical mass is. Yet we can guess that it lies somewhere beyond the hundred learners and below the thousand learners.

The opportunity here is to scale up the membership of virtual learning networks. Regular programming in local and national radio stations of success stories from peer-to-peer learning in market linkages would generate demand to engage in local learning networks. A locally sourced response to this demand: “if you are interested phone this mobile number if you want to get into further contact”, would result in rapid scaling up of learning networks.

2) Commercializing the facilitation of knowledge networks

Adequate facilitation by local resource people is crucial for knowledge networks to generate locally relevant information. Facilitators not only coach learners to innovate and share, they also motivate learners. Today local facilitators are rare. A further constraint to growing the knowledge pool of locally relevant information is language. East Africa’s economic community trades in English because it is the only language common to all. Local learners not fluent enough to make transactions in English are at a disadvantage just as those without mobile phones are disadvantaged.

The opportunity here is to explore the business potential for private facilitators. Any local private advisory service company can develop facilitation of local learning networks as an important component of their business. Selling news and success stories from the network to local radio provides income and publicity in one go. Further income streams could be realized through ‘on-the-job’ English language training.

3) Commercializing the brokering along marketing chains

“Exploitation and cheating” among various players in marketing chains is prevalent. This results in highly inefficient transactions along the links of the chains. Simple improvements initiated through the “First Mile” knowledge network have resulted in massive increases of income to farmers. Potential income increases from actively organizing producer to consumer market chains look to be even higher.

The opportunity here is to explore the business potential for private market brokers. Quality control, grading, standard packaging, etc., coupled with trademarks and fast and reliable information can become an important business niche. Large traders and small farmers will benefit from and pay for the service of controlled labels with standard produce and trackable producers. Combine this local market brokering role with an information system that allows brokers to operate virtual trading⁷ and transaction costs will drop even further.

4) Establishing local rural information services based on modern ICTs

Many small farmers and service providers are still outside the coverage of mobile phone services and more than fifty kilometres from an internet café. And yet, the use of SMS for organizing storage, bulking and long distance transactions is exploding. Also, using the internet to get new skills and share market information and intelligence is growing. The traditional

⁷ One successful example is the Kenya Agricultural Commodity Exchange, KACE. www.kacekenya.com

marketing chains are being fundamentally and rapidly overturned.

The opportunity here is to explore the business potential for private information services. Operating local, district or regional 'virtual' exchanges that allow market partners to access trustworthy information, clinch deals fast and register these deals for later tracking in case something goes wrong can work. Couple such virtual exchanges with a "Farmer News Service" that provides locally relevant information and coaching to groups of

farmers and other key players in the marketing chain and a viable business could result. Integrating an internet café with the news and coaching services would add further income streams to such a business.

How these challenges are met and how these opportunities are exploited will, in large measure, determine whether Linking Local Learners provides a useful approach to knowledge management for rural development in East Africa.

Five progressive policies for sustainable market development:

How the first mile effort with Linking Local Learners in East Africa translated operational insights into policy guidelines

The Linking Local Learners methodology was applied for conducting the «First Mile» pilot effort in the Agriculture Marketing Support Development Programme of the government of Tanzania, funded by IFAD. The pilot itself was funded by the Swiss government trust fund with IFAD, which allows IFAD to explore and develop new approaches in order to improve the effectiveness of its efforts. The «First Mile» was the effort to bridge the communication gap between remote and isolated rural producers and the market players.

The preceding article "Linking Local Learners: an approach to knowledge management for rural development", RDN 1/2007, tells of astonishing increases of income at the farmgate level. Later attempts at improving marketing intelligence at the district level appear to support these first results. They uncover big inefficiencies in the marketing chains in rural East Africa. And they also point to what could be achieved with configuring new communication technologies (mobiles and the internet) to allow the market players to break through the general pattern of distrust and cheating along all the marketing chains.

But what needs to be done to unleash this huge potential? The following «brief» pulls together the operational insights that were gained in the First Mile effort of IFAD in East Africa and translates them into policy guidelines. This brief is one of a series of briefs that were published by the First Mile effort. They can be downloaded at <http://www.linkinglearners.net> where more information can be obtained on this ongoing effort.



BRIEFING NOTE 20

Five Policy Objectives

The lessons we have learned over the last year point towards a new set of progressive policy objectives that would see governments and donors support the emergence of: 1) bottom-up mandated farmer organizations and alliances; 2) reliable commercial operations of the hardware required for connectivity even in remote areas; 3) on-the-job learning opportunities for marketing skills; 4) commercially viable local "Rural Service Companies"; and 5) national company to support local market service companies.

Progressive Policy 1: Support the emergence of bottom-up mandated farmer organizations and alliances that can more effectively access the markets.

Farmers soon realize the importance of forming higher level organizations to improve their access to markets. Getting the higher prices that big buyers can offer requires regular supplies of large volumes of product that are beyond the capabilities of a group of fifty or so small farmers. Many of the commodities small farmers produce do have national associations representing producers. However such associations tend to be dominated by larger producers and small farmers are suspicious of large 'top down' organizations. Small farmers wanting to improve their access to markets realize they must travel the difficult road of negotiating alliances across many small groups to reach a level of organization capable of negotiating with big buyers. Recommendations for action are:

- Provide resources for small farmer groups to purchase capacity building services to enhance their ability to organize themselves and run effective farmer associations.
- Provide resources for local service providers to assist farmers negotiate alliances and set up higher level organizations for joint marketing and export.
- Support higher level organizations set themselves up and start their operations including communication equipment.

Progressive Policy 2: Support the emergence of viable commercial services that ensure the reliable operations of the hardware required for connectivity even in remote areas.

The role of modern ICTs in accessing markets is now obvious to all. Farmers use mobile phones regularly to contact key players in the market chain. The internet has proved to be instrumental in the peer-exchange among district core groups and farmer networks. Modern ICT connectivity achieves the level of market transparency that allows trust relationships to break through the prevalent exploitation. Trust and collaboration substantially increase market efficiencies to the benefit of all actors, particularly small farmers. However, what is clear is that the initial investments for communication equipment and infrastructure are beyond the reach of most rural entrepreneurs. The lack of reliable servicing of this equipment is the single most important limiting operational factor to enhanced connectivity. Recommendations for action are:

- Support the launch of commercial operations of rental services for communication equipment where the servicing is included in the rental package.
- Provide resources for local commercial service providers to invest in skill-building to use modern communication equipment.
- Provide resources for local commercial service providers to develop and maintain information that is relevant for the local population and make it accessible through all suitable means.

Progressive Policy 3. Develop and operate on-the-job learning for marketing skills among all actors.

The successes of LLL have almost exclusively been achieved through "learning on the job" as opposed to classroom training that terminates with a certificate of attendance. In LLL participants' learn through applying their ideas on the ground and then staying in contact with each other and the mentors online in order to analyze and discuss their experiences and continue to learn from those. On-the-job mentoring is the new paradigm that needs to be pushed in order to continue. The reason for this is clear: There is no standard way of improving market linkages; each situation requires different operational details. Furthermore, the dynamics of the fast changing scene of rural marketing makes standard training modules obsolete at short notice. Today, the rapidly growing penetration of ICTs into rural areas allows people to stay in contact and exchange experiences provided the mentoring is usefully done. Achieving success in the marketing chains and providing successful business development services to actors along these chains requires sustained 'on-the-job' learning with regular contact with peers and mentors. Recommendations for action are:

- Provide resources to farmer associations and other key players along the market chain to engage in on-the-job training that is linked to peers and mentors.
- Support the development of local mentoring capacities in commercial service providers to deliver peer-to-peer learning opportunities.

Progressive Policy 4. Support the emergence of commercially viable "Rural Service Companies" that can continue to provide the services that maintain small farmer knowledge assets.

So far market linkage activities have been done by project “core groups” comprising of district government staff, NGO, and farmer group representatives. Similar ‘core group’ collaboration between farmers and government and or NGO staff were organized by Farmer Field School networks and farmer unions. For a sustainable continuation of the effort, the market linkage functions that the core groups have picked up need to be developed further and put on a sustained organizational and financial footing. The transition from project funding of these activities to sustained independent funding from those directly benefiting from the service, ie., farmer associations and market intermediaries, is a key to continuation of the impact of the efforts so far. Participants using LLL concluded that private commercial “Rural Service Companies” is the guiding principle which needs to be followed for successful organizational change. Recommendations for action are:

- Support groups who want to take up the challenge of launching and operating commercially oriented market services that provide all kinds of services required for marketing chains to become more efficient.
- Start right away with commercially registered service companies aiming for a commercially viable business plan, no transition via NGOs.
- Enter into local Public-Private-Partnerships with such companies that supports both the required operational R&D and capacity building of themselves as well as capacities of actors along the market chain.

Progressive Policy 5. Support a national back-up company to support local service companies to conduct the required business-oriented R&D, quality control and capacity building.

Project core groups, Farmer Field School networks and farmer unions so far have been strongly backed up by the national managers and international mentors. Our recent assessment pointed out that the peer exchange between core groups has been instrumental in triggering new ideas and new approaches and achieving success. Furthermore, a need emerged for intensive coaching of district core groups to achieve the transition from an NGO-type of operation to a commercial operation. Business development services for launching, developing and growing the local commercial services into viable businesses is a recognized need. Recommendations for action are:

- Support the launch and commercial operation of a national level company to support the local rural service companies.

- Set up Private Public Partnerships with national support companies which provide the resources for capacity building and R&D for commercial operations and developing investment opportunities for local entrepreneurs.

For more information contact:

clive.lightfoot@linkinglearners.net
uscheuermeier@dplanet.ch
kevin.gallagher@farmerfieldschool.net