HOW WE MADE IT IN AFRICA

ICTs set to transform smallholder farming

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Smallholder farming, which is the backbone of many African economies, is set to be transformed by a combination of investment and increasing access to information and communication technologies (ICTs), particularly mobile phones. The claim was made recently by Michael Hailu, director of the Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation (CTA), at ICT4Ag, a major conference on ICTs in agriculture.

"On this continent, 65% of the workforce is employed in agriculture and the sector generates 32% of GDP. Smallholder farmers, mostly women, produce 80% of Africa's food. African countries spend up to US$50bn a year on food imports. With abundant land, water and cheap labour, there is no good reason why Africa should import so much food.

"Yet there's good reason to be optimistic. After years of neglect, governments and the private sector are increasing investments in agriculture. Nevertheless, to achieve its full potential, smallholder agriculture must be transformed from a subsistence activity to a profitable, sustainable business. ICTs play a vital role in this transformation. They provide timely advice and information. They help farmers increase productivity. They make markets more efficient. And they increase incomes along the value chain."

The CTA director said, "the phenomenal growth in the number of mobile phone subscribers in Africa in recent years shows that change is on the way. In 2000, there were just 16.5m mobile subscriptions in Africa. Now, there are over 650m. Indeed, the number of people on the continent with access to mobile phones exceeds the number with access to clean water, electricity or a bank account."

Rwanda's commitment to transformation

Hailu was speaking at the ICT4Ag: the Digital Springboard for Inclusive Agriculture conference, held in Rwanda, a country where 80% of the working population are employed in agriculture but where the government has also invested heavily in the industry and ICTs as part of its Vision 2020 agenda to turn Rwanda into a middle-income country. Last week, the Rwandan government announced that a new network will provide high-speed broadband access to 95% of the country's population within three years.

Rwandan ministers attending the conference shared the upbeat mood. Minister of Agriculture and Animal Resources Dr Agnes Matilda Kalibata reminded the audience of the significance of agriculture in poverty reduction. "Agriculture is a low hanging fruit for poverty reduction. With 40%-65% employment in this sector in ACP countries, any investment will have a huge impact on the economy."

She also emphasised the importance of ICT in transforming agriculture.

“Rwanda has committed to transforming the country through ICT. Information and communication technologies, social media, Web 2.0 and mobile applications are changing the face of agriculture and rural development in many countries. The use of mobile devices is transforming the communication landscape through dissemination and sharing, and is changing the way we do business.”

Participants at the conference, including agricultural experts, farmers, young innovators, ICT companies and government officials, are focusing their attention on improvements to agriculture that can be brought about by technological innovation, capacity building and creating enabling policies and infrastructure. Key issues for discussion are the role of youth and the encouragement of entrepreneurship; the inclusion of farmers in decision making, information and crowdsourcing; and connectivity.

Rwandan Minister of Youth and ICT Jean Philbert Nsengimana said: “This day is a culmination of more than 10 years of consistent investments in ICT4D policy and strategy formulation, infrastructure development, mobile penetration, education and value added services development in parallel with agriculture modernisation efforts.”

CEO of the Rwanda Development Board, Ambassador Valentine Rugwabiza, highlighted the synergies between ICT and investment and also emphasised that ICT is only a tool whose importance will be derived from how well it is used.

Including youth and women

However, Hailu stressed that a major part of the key to securing the potential benefits of ICTs and investment in African agriculture was likely to be the extent to which countries are successful in harnessing the creative input of two key sectors: young entrepreneurs and women.

“Access to ICTs is not uniform,” he said, “and there is a digital divide. There is a significant gender imbalance, with men having better access to ICTs than women. And rural areas are significantly underserved compared to cities.”

He described the importance of young people as “pivotal”.

“Young people have the greatest aptitude for using ICTs, whether it is to communicate or develop new apps to improve agricultural productivity or access faraway markets. Africa’s youth must therefore play a pivotal role in the transformation of smallholder agriculture.

“ICTs – in particular mobile devices – have opened up unprecedented opportunities for agricultural and rural development. This development can offer a bright future for millions of women and men who derive their livelihood from farming and other forms of rural employment. Farmers, even in the remotest locations, can easily and readily access vital information on weather, market prices, pests and diseases as well as input prices.

“It is not just about linking farmers to markets or creating employment opportunities for young people. Social media also provide a platform for rural communities to contribute to policy making.”