Evaluation Brief: The New Alliance Information and Communication Technologies Agriculture Extension Challenge Fund (NA-ICT CF)

Introduction

The NA-ICT Challenge Fund was established to help improve agricultural productivity in selected food crops by smallholder farmers in six countries: **Ethiopia, Ghana, Malawi, Mozambique, Senegal and Tanzania.** The fund promotes use of ICT-enabled channels, delivered by the public and private sectors.

Coordinated within the wider context of the Scaling Seeds and Technologies Programme (SSTP[1]), implementation grants were awarded to mainly non-governmental organisations (NGOs). An independent monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) provider was appointed to provide MEL services to the programme.

Intended outcome

New knowledge and practices are applied by one million smallholder men and women farmers with access to financially sustainable ICT-enabled extension.

Funding

The NA-ICT Challenge Fund was supported by four donors: United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Department for International Development (DFID), International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF).

✔ What worked well

- Actual outcome exceeded the intended outcome: 1.3 million farmers applied new knowledge and practices.
- Considering existing cultural and social gender constraints, application of technologies and best practices by women in comparison to men was evaluated to be 'good' in four of the countries.
- The promise of both better yields and/or better climate resilience were key factors determining application of new technologies, as well as market factors and availability of inputs.
- While radio was the least expensive ICT-enabled extension channel, the evaluation found that, first, video, and then extension messages to mobile phones were the most effective in increasing application rates.
- ICT-enabled channels can complement and reinforce each other, and work best when combined with traditional extension, such as demonstrations and field days.
- In all countries, content was developed through a process that was aligned with SSTP and government policies, and the content development process was participatory, responsive to local needs, and in keeping with locally available channels.

✘ What didn't work so well

- Gender was not perceived by grantees to be a priority for the donors, and some of the crops promoted by SSTP, such as cereals, were those in which men have more control than women.
- While targets were exceeded overall, there was gender disparity in levels of use: 68% of the farmers that used the ICT-enabled service were men and 32% were women.
- The late contracting of a MEL service provider resulted in lack of high quality data and evidence being collected from the outset of the NA-ICT Challenge Fund.
- With a focus on results reporting to USAID, less time was invested in establishing a conducive learning environment to share experiences beyond basic learning.
- The multi-donor nature of the programme also led to some challenges in relation to the different reporting requirements and cycles of each donor.

Findings on Value for Money

- VfM as an approach was not embedded in the design of the programme and was thus difficult to measure retrospectively.
- Grantees used their funding well in terms of **effiency** in achieving outputs and **effectiveness** in achieving outcomes. At programme level, all targets were met with the funds received. However, neither cost-effectiveness nor impact indicators were measured by the grantees.
- On **economy**, weaknesses included lack of accountability and VfM in agreements, with lack of data on competitive procurement, cost savings and actual expenditure. Where economy measures may have been taken by grantees, this was not captured in reporting.
- With women having more limited access to ICT-enabled services than men, as a result of socio-economic factors and the choice of crops and technologies under SSTP, **equity** was also lacking.

Challenge for the future

An effective **content development process** has been a key success factor in promoting use of ICT-enabled agricultural extension. The absence of NA-ICT challenge funding for such processes is likely to affect the ongoing supply of relevant extension messages.

[1] a five-year, USD 47 million partnership between USAID and Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) which aimed, in part, to increase the availability of new varieties of key food crops and technologies in the same six targeted countries.

Key recommendations

MEL contractors

- For multi-country programmes, establish common indicators with shared definitions, at the beginning of the programme; and create data collection tools in collaboration with implementing partners in the countries concerned.
- Enhance knowledge sharing and learning opportunities by investing in building trust and communication between implementation partners right from the start of implementation, ideally in a face-to-face context.
- Identify whether evidence on VfM, impact or specific cross-cutting issues is required by the donor(s), and build this into the MEL plan, results framework and indicators, in collaboration with the implementation partners.
- Facilitate VfM measurement by aligning the MEL framework with the programme's financial systems that will be required to capture expenditure data related to outputs and outcomes.

Donors

- Assess MEL capacity of implementation partners at the beginning of the programme and build capacity where required, e.g. in monitoring VfM and/or impact.
- Contract the MEL service provider early in the implementation phase in order to maximise data and evidence on results.
- Build VfM into the design, budget and ToRs of the MEL contractor.
- Be more specific about how implementation partners should address cross-cutting issues, for example gender, within the context of the specific focus of the programme and its cultural context(s).

- Mainstream ICT-enabled extension into agricultural programme design.
- Tailor invitations for bids to ensure the best combination of partners for future sustainability of the programme.
- When designing agricultural programmes for rain-fed areas, seek to fund these for a minimum of five years, to allow for capacity building, impact and sustainability.

Good practice learned from implementing partners

- Identify the costs and relative strengths of different ICT channels to use, and how they can complement each other and reinforce extension communication.
- Ensure that content development and validation processes involve all relevant stakeholders, and allow space for development of dynamic content (to respond to sudden information needs in response for example to particular pest and disease infestations).
- Use local languages and ensure that content is developed in a timely manner and is tailored to, and tested for, each ICT channel in use.
- Ensure that ICT-enabled extension draws on "trusted" voices (e.g. of cooperative leaders, researchers, extension staff, lead farmers).
- Take gender into account by carrying out landscape analysis to find out which ICT channels women have access to, and are most trusted by women. Where female smallholders have limited access to certain ICT channels, draw on community/radio listening clubs and use women's (farmers, broadcasters) voices.

- Consider how ICT-enabled extension and any existing traditional extension can be synchronised to reinforce messages, build trust and create synergies.

Evaluation methodology

The performance evaluation of the NA-ICT Challenge Fund was guided by the OECD-DAC analytical framework and assessments were carried out along the lines of relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability criteria, with gender as a cross-cutting issue. The evaluation developed a Theory of Change as an analytical framework and employed contribution analysis to assess causal pathways. It also conducted a partial Value for Money assessment to support the analysis. The evaluation team employed a mixed methods approach, and conducted field visits to three of the six countries.

Download the evaluation report at:

https://devtracker.dfid.gov.uk/projects/GB-1-204423/documents