RKN - The Rural Knowledge Network

Facilitating smallholders’ access to markets in East Africa

Experiences in the region

Small farmers in East Africa lack access to relevant information and knowledge and to modern communication tools, and they lack access to markets for their produce. Based on experiences from the Farmer Field School Programme in Eastern and Southern Africa, and the First Mile project it was clear that services providing small farmers access to markets must be commercially viable companies to ensure sustainability, and the market intelligence needs to be locally relevant. Commercial viability looked possible if businesses at the local level were properly set-up and training was provided.

Commercial partners of the network

The Rural Knowledge Network (rKn) was set up in 2007 to facilitate the emergence of businesses for small farmers’ access to markets from local to national level. It comprises:

- Information Board Managers (IBMs) operating a frontline market intelligence service at producer level.
- Market Access Companies (MACs) operating a local market brokering service at district level.
- National Marketing Companies and their regional managers, operating a service for transaction security and research and development on markets and business operations.

Communication and information technologies for market access

E-mail, mobile phones, SMS, face-to-face meetings and Internet are the communication tools used to facilitate the core services of market access businesses:

- Inform: collect market intelligence; share good ideas, experiences and lessons; peer exchange and learning.
- Broker: make deals, link to input suppliers, technical and financial advice.
- Explore: new crops, new markets, new value addition.
- Convene: key player collaboration, negotiation table.
- Organize: collection of produce, bulking and distribution, distribution of inputs.

The network benefits from related initiatives, such as the First Mile, which is testing modern information and communication technologies to access market intelligence in rural areas in Tanzania; and mobile payment services already widely used in Kenya, offered by commercial mobile phone service providers.

RKN – the project

The Rural Knowledge Network (RKN) Pilot Project for East Africa supports the emergence of commercially viable market access services for building effective and efficient rural marketing chains for the benefit of all actors. RKN is developing a people-centred knowledge management process that is built on an understanding of farmers’ needs, shapes the existing technical information to respond to farmers’ requirements and delivers knowledge in a form they can understand. The network encompasses market access networks in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, with actors at national, district and local level keeping a constant and effective communication link (e-mail, telephone, SMS, face-to-face meetings, Internet etc) for information sharing and business to business learning. Lessons learnt at all levels are captured, documented and shared widely using an Internet platform.

An associated initiative, the First Mile is conducting rental trials to test the affordability, usefulness and appropriateness in rural areas of solid state laptops that use a SIM-card enabled modem to access the Internet. These laptops are currently being tested by selected information board managers and market access companies.