

Village phones open up Uganda's hinterland

By [Davis J. Weddi](#)

To a lay person in Uganda, it is difficult to explain how ICTs fit into agriculture. But today, shrewd farmers in the rural Kayunga District of Central Uganda understand that ICT is the key to vital information that helps them to plan their crop production and gain access to markets. Davis Weddi explains.

The Farmers Information Communication Management (FICOM) project is a pilot project which although new, seems to be a success. It is carried out under the auspices of the Uganda National Farmers Federation (UNFFE), the largest farmers advocacy membership organisation in Uganda.

It's part of a bigger project initiated by the Uganda National Farmers Federation ([UNFFE](#)). The project is being done for rural Ugandan Farmers in two other district of Luwero and Jinja. It is called the Farmers Information Communication Management (FICOM) project and is implemented by an organisation called Information Communication Technologies for Africa Rural Development ([ICTARD](#)). The project receives funding from Syngenta Foundation for Sustainable Agriculture based in Basel, Switzerland. The project covers

UNFFE the largest farmers advocacy membership organisation in Uganda saw the necessity to initiate FICOM with the aim of easing UNFFE internal communication and connection to the districts and other affiliated members, easing communication with the district members (Jinja, Luwero and Kayunga), and among the grassroots farmers who in turn would find ease in communicating among themselves and the entire world.

Lost crops due to poor communication

Kayunga District had some of the most unreachable villages in the country. Visiting the area involves a tough hassle given the terrible neglected road system.

Hellene Karamagi, who heads ICTARD, visited Kayunga last year and explained that on her first trip to the remotest parts of the district, she found heaps of pineapples rotting by the roadside for lack of access to markets.

Farmers told her that they were waiting for buyers from Kenya and other parts of Uganda including the Kampala. But the buyers were delayed and some of the produce was starting to rot.

Karamagi's instincts were set rolling and she determined to find a real solution for these farmers.

One of the immediate issues was that there was a huge deficit in communication to the rural farmer and even at UNFFE headquarters and the member districts.

The problem is not limited to Kayunga District alone; it is common all over rural Uganda that farmers whose produce is ready for market have ended up failing to sell due to lack of means of communication with the market.

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Improving communication from the ground up

This situation prompted UNFFE to initiate the FICOM pilot, to enable such services as necessary information gathering and effective dissemination to the rural farmers, the districts and UNFFE headquarters. The information gathered and disseminated had to be relevant to the farmers to enable them to make informed decisions when planning their crop production.

The project is implemented by an organisation called Information Communication Technologies for Africa Rural Development (ICTARD) (<http://www.ictard.org/>). The project receives funding from Syngenta Foundation for Sustainable Agriculture based in Basel, Switzerland.

FICOM began with the aim of easing UNFFE internal communication and connection to the districts and other affiliated members in Jinja, Luwero and Kayunga, and among the grassroots farmers who in turn would find it easier to communicate among themselves and with the entire world.

ICTARD set out to improve exchange of customized agro- and health-related information between district farmers' associations and the local, national and global agricultural players. ICTARD also seeks to improve access to existing agro-market solutions using ICT and see to it that additional income is created for farmers groups by providing phone services to the rest of the community. Another goal is to empower farmers' groups with adequate skills for sustainability of the project.

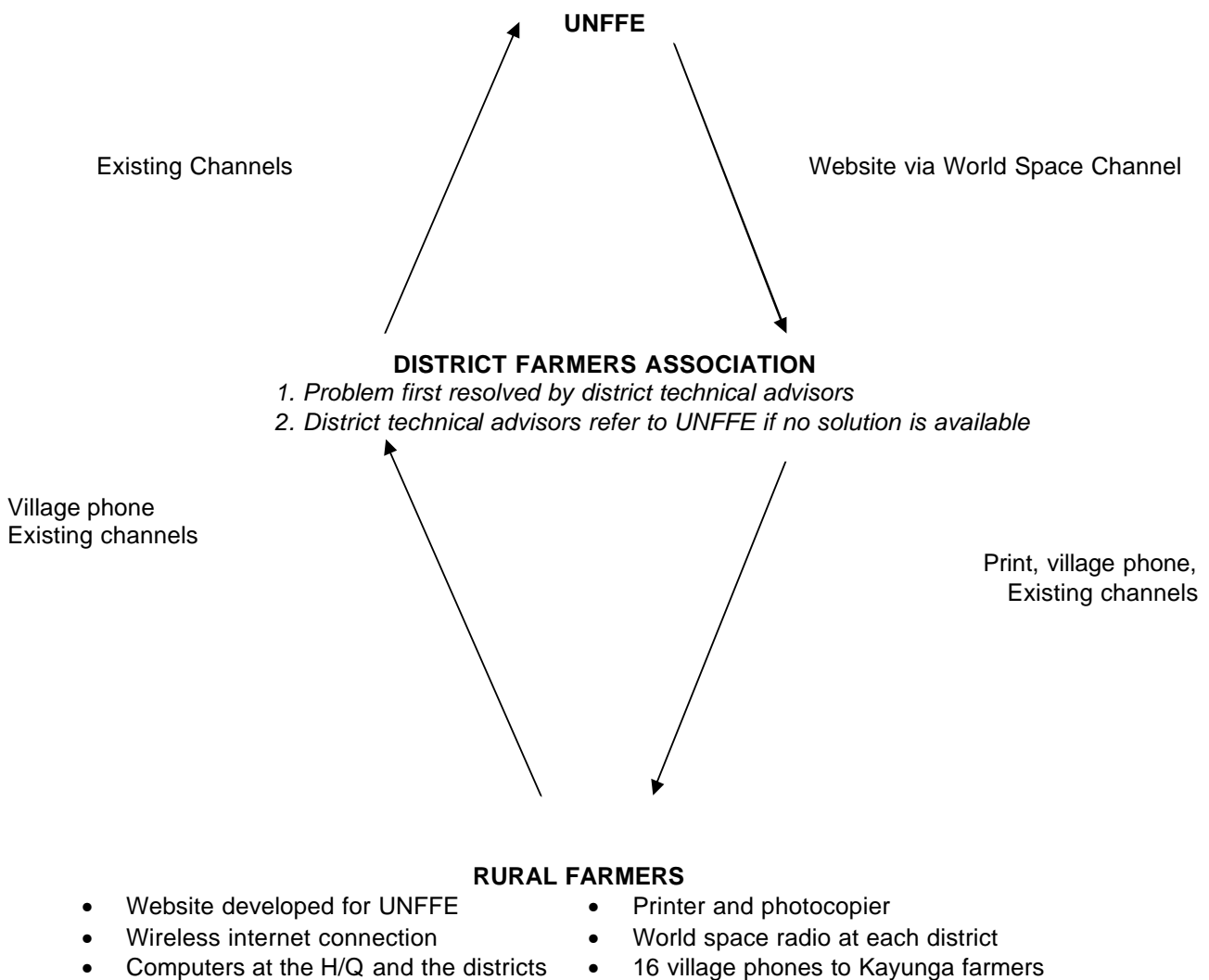
In addition to the organisations named above, other vital stakeholders had to be called in to make the FICOM project a reality. They include the Ministry of Water, Lands and Environment (Meteorology department) and the National Agricultural Research organisation (NARO).

Building on what already exists

Faced with the challenge of improving communications throughout the UNFFE umbrella organization and among grassroots farmers in the district, ICTARD chose to put emphasis on existing communication channels like the village phone, by increasing on their number and distribution around the three concerned districts. 16 village phones were distributed and form a key part of the information and communication system.

Another feature of the project was the use of Worldspace digital radio, through which detailed information on weather conditions in the country is disseminated.

Information flows in the pilot project¹:



¹ From: www.ictard.org/ictard_project_reports.htm

First fruits

The farmers themselves have maximized the use of the village phones to access market information from any part of Uganda. They use locally developed SMS services to send and automatically receive updates on market prices. Because of this, farmers no longer have to wait for buyers and middlemen who con them. They have direct contact with the buyers and no more middlemen involved. Some farmers are now able to sell to the big supermarket chains in Kampala, including Uganda's Metro and Uchumi.

They have eliminated unnecessary transport costs. Instead of paying 5000/= (about US\$2.5) for transport to look for buyers or be paid with a lot of uncertainties, farmers now first make a call to ascertain payments and other related activities.

According to ICTARD, the new solutions have improved the farmers' external relations. Farmers' groups have been able to communicate both internally and externally, some have managed to get development funds and other related benefits, they also now have accessible contact addresses for easy communication.

Some farmers have also seen the widening of their income base. Instead of depending on only agricultural activities for income, farmer groups are now realizing a side income from the village phones whereby there is possibility earning money from charging for phone calls made.

The village phones are also offering employment opportunities for telephone operators.

The rural farmer associations are now being empowered with basic computer, business support and management training for sustainability purposes. This includes:- basic computer knowledge, downloading and viewing of information from the world space channel; business support training; book keeping, customer care, marketing and business planning, conflict management, avoidance and resolution.

Institutional strengthening

The project is still new, but the impact is already being felt as the first harvest period begins. First and foremost, according to ICTARD there has been an immediate improvement in communication.

The UNFFE head offices in Kampala have installed a wireless network, creating an environment of easy and fast communication internally and externally. They have hired an information manager and developed a website, giving UNFFE wider exposure to national and international audiences. In addition, improved communication makes reaching the farmers at the grassroots easier.

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- ICTARD

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Even districts without Internet connection now have access to updated information taken from the UNFFE website. Through the project Kayunga and Jinja Districts farmers received computers with printers, photocopiers and Worldspace radio which improved their access to meteorological and agricultural advisory information from the Ministry of Lands, Water and Environment. The district farmers' association offices are now empowered and recognized as agricultural information dissemination centers. Several farmers have now been trained on accessing and using the information accessed from the Worldspace radio/channel.

Lessons learned

A big lesson is that ICTs are no longer the isolated reserve of literate people. The notion that ICT requires ICT literacy and that the technology is very expensive and that the rural people cannot easily adapt to the technologies, is now open to debate. ICTARD says: "with proper planning, the right approach to ICTs can play a big role in poverty eradication in the rural areas."

Another lesson according to ICTARD is that the village phone is the most sustainable means of communication and access to market and other information to improve the livelihoods of rural farmers. Previously, there were phones in the villages but on a very limited scale. The project increased the number of phones and provided the farmers with additional information on how to use them productively. The village phones are very user-friendly, though the phone operators still have to learn some detailed phone functions.

With the Worldspace radio, it is basically the district technical staff who are trained as well as representatives from the sub-counties in the districts.

At the end of the day, the end product is improved communication for rural farmers in Kayunga, Jinja and Luwero districts. There is nothing more valuable to the farmers than information relevant to their prevailing needs including technical and advisory, market information and the like.

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For further information contact iConnect coordinator in Uganda
Davis Weddi, dweddi@newvision.co.ug

www.iConnect-online.org is a knowledge sharing platform for Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in sustainable development. iConnect draws content from its partners, links resources and expertise and encourages collaboration. For the International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD), the host of iConnect, this is a way to share experiences, lessons learned and ideas, and interact with communities and people with an interest in development and the applications of ICTs. These experiences can lead to a better understanding of the actual benefits of ICTs for Development (ICT4D). The core of iConnect will be a series of locally written articles on the impact and the use of ICTs for development. The articles have a strong focus on fact finding; objective information on ICT4D practices from a southern perspective: Southern content written by Southern people. i4d is the iConnect partner for Asia, and ECA is the iConnect partner for Africa, disseminating the articles to their public.
