*"Linking Local Learners",
a Support for Farmers
and Service Providers for
Developing Demand
Driven Services in
Agriculture.*

*Report on the 2004
Programme of Learning in
East Africa.*

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Linking
Local
Learners

http://www.linkinglearners.net

Farmers and Service Providers in East Africa join on the internet to innovate in demand-driven services for agricultural information, enterprise diversification, marketing and the local organization of privatized services in a programme of linked local learning supported by donors taking part in the Neuchatel Initiative[1].

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[1] *During the Neuchatel Initiatives annual meetings of 2002 and 2003 interest in learning more about success factors and failure risks in operationalizing farmer demand-driven extension emerged. This interest was shared with a number of the Initiatives resource organizations, namely ISG, DAAS, LBL, CTA, and FAO, who reported on the difficulties of putting demand-driven services into practice in a way that truly benefits resource poor farmers. In 2004 IFAD, SIDA and Danida provided financial support for a programme of "Local Lesson Learning in Demand-Driven Agricultural Extension." This is the annual report of that programme.*

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1. Impact of Linked Local Learning

SUMMARY

From February to December 2004 this programme took place in Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania. It aimed to establish the mechanisms and an environment for horizontal peer exchange between local farmers and service providers. First a coordinating mentoring team was established, followed by the self-organization of learning groups from existing farmer organizations as well as existing public and private service agencies. Second an identification of learning topics by learning groups in a training workshop in each country. An internet platform was then installed and operated that allowed learning exchange at a distance. And finally after a trial period of four months a regional workshop brought stakeholders together again to assess the learning experience and explore the way ahead.

It turns out that the users experienced a breakout from their established local information networks, allowing them to connect with each other over great distances and thereby explore hitherto unknown potentials for their local groups. Within this short time and inspite of substantial investment of own resources the users assess the programme as being something that had made worthwhile improvements in farmer demand and service delivery.

1.1. The Linked Local Learning Programme in Brief

The linked local learning programme on demand-driven services operated from February to December 2004 in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. It enabled horizontal learning and peer exchange between local farmers and service providers to explore how demand driven services could be improved. It was not a top down programme of learning driven by national or international advisors and managers. Making demand driven services work for low income farmers and local service providers is a complex business that has to be sorted out on site in the local setting. The local learners engaged in this programme were self motivated as they were trying to earn money and make a living either as farmers or as service providers or as both. The programme was also designed to produce insights into government policy (regulation quality control, poverty) and investment programming for donors and government agencies. The programme was implemented in four stages as follows:

- Stage one included establishing a coordination group and mentoring team comprising representatives from ISG, LBL, DAAS, CTA and FAO and making the Linking Local Learners 'LLL' internet learning support service operational[2]. The coordination group met four times during the year. Stage one also started the identification of potential local learning groups in Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania.

- Stage two concluded the self organization of learning groups and the development of learning topics to improved demand driven services and overcome information and communication management constraints. The major activity was a four day training course conducted in Uganda 21-25 June, Tanzania 28 June – 2 July, and Kenya 12- 16 July at which some seventy trainees were trained in how to use the LLL internet learning support service.

- Stage three saw a functioning internet learning support service in place and the learning groups in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania engaged in internet supported lesson learning.

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[2] *The 'LLL' internet learning support service can be viewed at* http://www.linkinglearners.net.*(Log in with username = guest and password = readonly)*

- Stage four included a regional assessment workshop conducted from 21 – 23 October in Kakamega by twenty representatives from Ugandan and Kenyan learning groups. Tanzanian groups did not participate due to time constraints and fund releases. Plans for the continuation of lesson learning were developed by Kenya and Uganda groups at the assessment workshop while the Tanzanians plan to do this at a strategic planning workshop scheduled for January 2005. The coordinators presented a preliminary analysis of learning including synthesis of critical issues affecting demand driven services at the Neuchatel Initiative annual meeting between 2 – 4th November in Denmark.

This local learning programme relied on rapid and frequent communication flows between local farmers and service providers. Cheap and rapid sharing of local learning experiences and enhancing the local learning process with the ideas of others was made possible using the internet. The Linking Local Learners 'LLL' internet learning support service allowed groups of local learners to use email and internet to stay in contact with each other over distances and helped them organize and see the advances in their learning over time. Learners used the service to conduct 'virtual' distance workshops on learning topics of their own choice.

1.2. User Accounts of How Farmers have Benefited

In October just four months after their training some twenty of the seventy local learning facilitators from Kenya and Uganda met in Kenya to assess their experience with linked local learning. What follows are accounts of three of them. Betty Ajambo, from Mahono Mahalabani Farmer Field School in Busia, Uganda recounted how linked local learning has changed her work.

"Before I had an email address I could not communicate and share ideas with learners from other countries. I would only share with whom I see every day but now I can share with learners from Kenya, Tanzania and even the facilitators. I am now able to surf the internet and look for information, before I did not know that there was information on the internet which I could get that could assist me plus my group in whatever activity we are doing. For example: on the side of Marketing. Of course, for us we just know that when the middleman come we just sell but we didn't know that we could pool together our maize as a group and maybe have better bargaining power thereby we can sell our maize at a higher price avoiding this exploiting middleman. When I learnt this though the LLL services my mind is now open to see problems. Before, it was as if my mind was in one place because I could not share ideas with people who were not near me but now when I read from different people I get new ideas and this helps me to see the problems that I used not to see before. You know sometimes you can know, think, things are forever whatever you do and you do not even try to look for solutions! But now, with these LLL services, my mind is opened. Things I used to see as unchangeable I can now see them as challenges and together with my group we can sit down and try to see how we can solve them."

Perez Kawumi, Mpigi District coordinator of UNFFE Uganda recounted how linked local learning benefited his work:

"Initially the question that I posted was how do we increase farms access to the markets because basically within Mpigi are blessed to have farmers growing for the local market and for the international markets, we have a good number of exporters so we have received some good information about how we can access the international market and how we can prepare for the local market and recently we have got information on organic vegetables production and I managed to develop a concept out of the information I got on organic vegetables production and they have submitted it to Danida. And yesterday they have accepted the

concept and are telling me to write a proposal so maybe such kind of information has benefited us a lot."

John Inganga member of the Kakamega Farmer Field School Network recounted how linked local learning helped him:

My experience with the LLL is that it has been quite easy to get information which previously was very difficult to get. For example getting information from KARI on seed potatoes because when you go there the officer concerned is not around but now when we got the email address we just got connected and we got all the information. Secondly, we are working on a program of marketing sweet potatoes so we emailed KACE that is the Kenya Agricultural Commodity Exchange and they were able to provide us with the prices for various sweet potatoes. So this one was very interesting because we were just able to hear about it but now we were able to confirm. That is really practical.

1.3. What the Users Say about the Programme

All participants at the assessment workshop in Kenya were asked: Has the LLL process allowed you to do things that you did not do before? Their responses to this question were as follows:

"Improved our links with other Farmer Field School groups"
"To share information with stakeholders abroad"
"Enhanced ability to use the internet to communicate to other people on the global level"
"Sharing of experiences and information"
"Raise discussion with others"
"Read documents from other east African countries"
"Sharing visions between farmers"
"Now I'm forced to go on the internet so I can get more information to share with my group"
"Visiting net to search for success stories from other areas"
"Simplified information flow"
"Closer working links"
"Stimulating formation of marketing groups"
"Organising training for service providers"
"Allows regular meeting of service providers on effective service delivery"
"Practical solves farmers' real problems"
"Created confidence in work performance and perception"
"Diverse views from discussions require synthesis so I make a summary for my group"
"My mind is now open to see problems and seek solutions with others which I didn't do before - I thought that things could be solved by themselves with time"
"Has enabled me to make informed decisions due to discussion topics"
"I am now promoting a more bottom up approach"

2. User Assessment of Linked Local Learning in Demand Driven Services

SUMMARY

LLL clearly assisted farmers and their organizations to improve their synthesis and articulation of demand. The act of exchanging with other learners over formulated messages allowed them to nail down what they really wanted to do. Discussing messages and preparing their own inputs led to more focused group discussions. Remoteness to internet points was overcome with 'brokerage' by a group member. In spite of the high costs for travelling to the internet points, for online-time and for printouts, the groups evidently thought it was worth it..

The common space for demanders and suppliers turned out to be the internet interactions tied to learning group discussions. This led to a "levelling out" of the various service providers, ie. it mattered less whether information came from other farmer groups, NGOs, government officers or the private sector. A challenge turns out to be the brokering on the internet for enhancing inputs into the discussions. The trainings provided the environment to build confidence and trust in the value of each contribution, and in the required skills to contribute. But sustained facilitation of online-exchanges remains a challenge.

The emerging networks among small local groups appear to counteract the dominance on the information loops by the large commercial farms and big entrenched organizations, and thus support the government policies on rural business development.

2.1. Enabling Farmer Demand

On the enabling farmer demand side, the LLL process clearly assisted farmers and farmer organisations to improve their synthesis and articulation of demand. This was done first by ensuring that each organisation had an internet-literate member through training that focused on use of the LLL web service. In addition, methods were discussed on establishing learning groups and processes so that issues could be discussed by groups far from the internet site itself. Learning groups formulated issues, questions and discussed feed back coming from other groups. Learning group minutes were transparently posted on the LLL service so each group could "see" the interests and needs of other groups. "Brokerage" was done by a group member who facilitated the groups' internet interaction – thus demand reflected the views of groups. The cost of the "brokerage" was time spent in travel and internet café time which was considered demanding on the groups but worthwhile in terms of new information and experiences received. The cost of travel and learning group discussions is considered to be done as a part of on-going interaction within the organisations. The "extra time" spent in discussions was considered worthwhile for crystallising demands (questions, issues), discussing feed back and using information for group decisions and actions. A major benefit of the process was that new information was being acquired from experienced persons and groups outside the usual set of information/service providers thereby providing new knowledge and concepts not available locally. Indeed, the process helped "brokers" to be motivated to access information and groups had higher expectations that useful information and experiences could be accessed from other farmers, extension staff, NGOs and others involved in the learning areas. Lastly, the group dynamics lead to group enrichment by focusing group discussion, preparing inputs, discussing outputs and thus social-added value. But also technical enrichment or technical added value is common due to getting technical information from outside the usual circle of interactions in a village.

Comments from the users of the LLL process:

"Farmers are using direct communication but also using brokers like NAADS and Farmers Fora, UNFFE and KENFAP local branches, Farmer field school networks, and Local government at parish and sub county level."

"Close to half posted questions are related to day to day problems. They are practical and common to all. E.g. how to manage groups, stockists, organic vegetables."

"In general, learning groups are established to priority issues and themes. The process is facilitated by persons that were involved in the LLL training (e.g. network chairpersons, etc)."

"Discussions are held in local language, crystallised and summarised, then posted in English. Printed responses are discussed in local language in groups. Coordinators need to help community to identify problem."

"Kakamega FFS Network received a lot of experiences from farmers especially from Uganda."

"Most of the other stakeholders have their own websites and e-mail addresses. Getting them involved will be on a case-by-case basis. People need to be trained in searching for information on the Internet. They can then contact the information sources as needed. Involving researchers is always good, they can post their new research findings on the LLL website. Ministry could also be involved, as could KACE.

2.2. Enabling Service Supply

In the LLL process service providers were also participants in the discussions – the brokers and learning groups. These "service providers" in fact were also "demanders" as the exchange of information and experiences is two ways. When difficult issues arose, it was the obligation of participants to invite new persons into the discussion. This was also a role of the mentors who in general have wider networks due to long term exposure to international sources of expertise and information. The common space for demanders and suppliers is the internet interactions tied to learning group discussions. It was observed by some participants that the internet reduced or eliminated the differences between service providers – whether from a farmer group, extension officer, higher government officer, NGO, or private sector – thus providing a democratic and equal platform for discussion and interaction. All involved had specific experiences to bring to the group – "suppliers". However, the training of "brokers" on internet and learning group formation is an important step for all participants to "supply" inputs into discussions. The role of the training was seen as essential for capacity building as well as providing a 'face-to-face" interaction to build confidence and trust that all contributors have important roles. Quality management was carried out by the LLL mentors and local network coordinators – using both direct messages on the LLL discussion groups as well as private emails to particular persons that needed specific "coaching".

Comments from the participants users of the LLL process:

"It has led to good communication between the farmers and the service providers."

"Contributed to farmers making informed choices."

"Farmers use the LLL to shorten the producer to market chain through: better marketing information, keeping the middle broker out of business, arranging direct sale, and making value added to produce."

"In our team, we included service providers such as KACE. They undertook to provide information to the team. We discussed with them the possibility of being stockists. We have another service provide who deals in farm inputs (FIPS Africa – Farm Inputs Provision Services Africa). They have brought the network in contact with a fertilizer company. Post-harvest dust for harvest silos. Safaricom Kace service on market information via mobile, also made known to the learning teams."

2.3. Policy and Empowerment

All the countries involved consider demand driven extension for farmer empowerment as a policy goal although Tanzania and Kenya still have traditional extension hierarchies from T&V systems – while Uganda has evolved through NAADS to local service provision through contracting. NGOs are explicit stakeholders in all countries – especially farmer unions KENFAP and UNFFE. There are no restrictions that would keep farmers from getting organised by themselves or with the assistance of private suppliers. NAADS in Uganda uses contractual arrangements between farmer forums and service providers facilitated by sub-county offices – thus stimulating farmer organisations. Various NGOs and projects also stimulate farmer organisation. Linkages between research and extension are encouraged at various levels. However, except in NAADS, there is little input from small farmer groups into mainstream extension, and in no case into research. Large commercial farmers and their organisations of course have a great voice in terms of research demands.

Comments from the users of the LLL process:
"Education system for training staff (public colleges) still creating top-down graduates. Older staff have hard time to change as well."
"Financial ability of farmers for cost sharing is a constraint for getting to where the voice can be heard."
"NGO's are helping but Micro Finance Institutions can lend to organised groups although with high interest."
"Market research for example is needed but KARI/NARO have no market researchers to respond to demand and they are not client oriented."
"Post-harvest and agro-processing research results are needed."

The evidence of empowerment of farmer groups is clear. Decisions on topics, inputs and discussions are taken by the participating groups and individuals. Use of time and money to participate are based on group contributions and own assessment of the usefulness of the systems. It is clear that extension staff and government officers involved in the learning groups both are able to demand information and experiences from other participants while also provide inputs and encouragement to local farmer groups. The LLL experience is transparent to all participants. In the case of the LLL, the "donor" is not a clear entity in that farmer groups participating are contributing their time because they see benefits directly. The "donor" does provide very important support to the programme coordination team while most mentors are provided for under separate arrangements. The issue of "poor people should be paid for attending training" is at issue only for capacity building in areas such as internet learning and assessment workshops at sites long distant from homes and beyond the capacity of most resource poor farmers that have become the main participants in the LLL experience.

Comments from the users of the LLL process:
"Access to the Internet doesn't mean that everybody in the team needs to have access; one person can access and print out the messages, the rest of the group works with printed copies The process involves a number of different stakeholders – in that sense it is broad-based and inclusive."
"A group member described a case in which someone posted information on irrigation kits, which the learning team then promoted among farmers. The LLL process helps in exploring a new technology."
"If one of them wanted to find out some information on a specific question, I can simply type the question and will get responses from other people. And they might not all be the same, thus I will get a range of answers to choose from."
"Diversity of views on any discussion as not limited by own thoughts in own groups."

"Sharing experiences allows self-improvement and ways to solve problems."
"Provides new stimulation and calls for summarising and crystallising ideas especially for coordinators."
"Helped networking in local area as other stakeholders also came not just the host group."

3. The Learners and the Organization for Learning

SUMMARY

The local groups were all existing self help groups of farmers or field schools or farmer associations connected to farmer unions, often joined by service providers. Some of the District level learners were supported by national level offices. Learning groups sometimes comprised only local people, sometimes there was also vertical integration within the groups up to national level. All learners together shared the Demand Driven Services platform, which itself shares a "Knowledge Pool" on the internet with other similarly structured efforts.

The local learning groups were supported internationally by a coordination group of mentors from ISG, DAAS, LBL, CTA and FAO.

3.1. The Organization of Linked Local Learning

Learners organized themselves for learning first at the local level. The local groups were all existing groups of farmers as either self help groups or field schools or farmer associations connected to farmer unions. Local groups were sometimes served by district level support agencies like farmer union Branch offices or Farmer Field School network offices. Similarly, extension field workers were supported by district extension officers or coordinators as in the case of NAADS in Uganda. Some of the district level learners were also supported by national level offices as was the case for the Farmer Unions, Government Extension Services like NAADS and DATICS in Uganda and TMLA in Tanzania. Many learning groups, however, stop at the district level. All these learners were trained and mentored by the international coordination group of the programme. All these learners worked together in a learning team on Demand Driven Services that not only crossed district boundaries but also national boundaries. This learning team pooled their knowledge with other learning teams such as the team on Information and Communication Management on the LLL internet learning support service as shown in Figure 1.

3.2. The Local Organization of Learning Groups

All the local groups involved had been in existence for some five or more years before the learning programme started. Some like the farmer unions were much older. All those groups formed by farmers or with farmers as members included small holders growing staple foods, vegetables and some cash crops like coffee or tea. Most kept a small number of chickens, goats and a few cattle or if more they were pastoralists like the Massai. Most local learning groups had between ten and thirty members with the largest group having forty-five members. The learning groups either comprised of single organizations such as youth clubs, Farmer Field Schools or farmer unions, or multiple organizations including farmers, extension, local government, NGO's and private sector. Few of the groups comprised just farmers and service providers. The large majority of the groups met monthly with few meeting twice a month or weekly and one or two meeting irregularly. All took minutes of their meetings. The local organization of learning groups in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania was as follows. Names, institutions and contact email addresses of local learners can be found in Annex A.

Figure 1. The Organization of Learners in Linked Local Learning
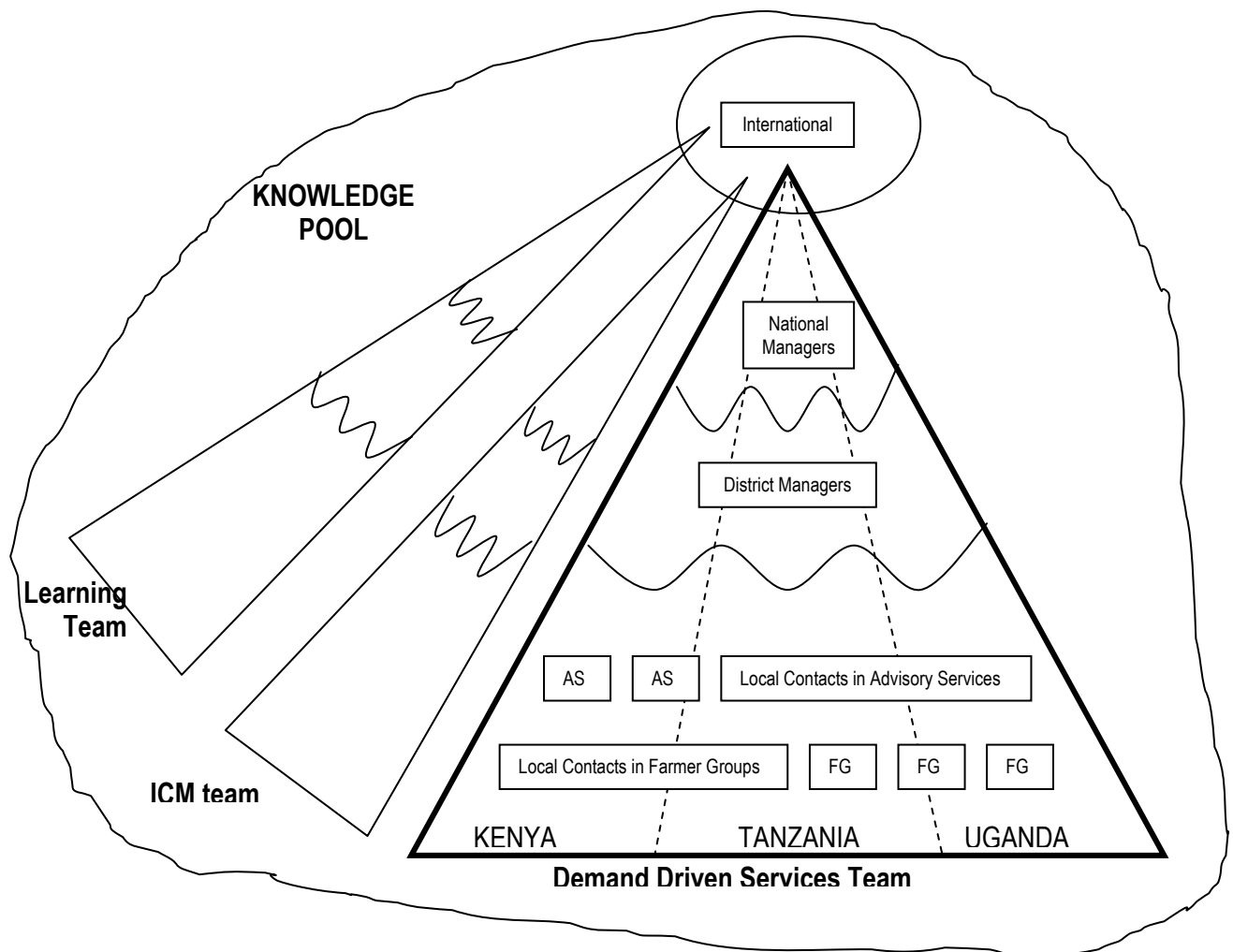
In Kenya learners from the Kenyan Federation of Agricultural Producers (KENFAP) and the Farmer Field Schools Networks have organized themselves into learning teams in Lake Region, Mount Kenya Region, Western Region and in the following districts: Bungoma, Busia and Kakamega. Farmers from the Livestock Sector Stakeholder Association (LISSA) and Mugomoni Organinc Farmer Self Help Group have organized themselves into a learning team to cover Mount Kenya Region.

In Uganda learners from Uganda National Farmers Federation (UNFFE), National Agricultural Advisory Services (NAADS), District Agricultural Technology Information Centres (DATICS) and Farmer Field Schools Networks have organized themselves into learning teams in the following districts: Soroti, Busia, Masaka, Tororo, Iganga, and Mpigi.

In Tanzania the Tanzania Multi-stakeholder Learning Association (TMLA) supported at the national level the Farmer Field Schools Networks and local beneficiaries of the Danida Agriculture Sector Programme Support (ASPS) in the Ministry of Agriculture organize cross-institutional teams in Morogoro, Iringa and Mbeya regions.

3.3. International Support to Local Learning Groups

The local learning groups were supported internationally by a coordination group of mentors from the International Support Group (ISG), the Danish Agricultural Advisory Service (DAAS), the Swiss Centre for Agricultural Extension & Rural Development (LBL), the Centre Technique de Cooperation Agricole et Rurale (CTA), and from the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

Mentoring the local learning groups in their use of the LLL internet learning support service involved making suggestions on ideas, links to others who can help, and documentation of outcomes to build a knowledge pool of experiences, good practice and impact. There were twelve learning topics under discussion each required time to guide and encourage the learners. Keeping up with discussions and contributions to the library required that once a week mentors read updates, formulated and emailed suggestions (including urls to useful websites), and supported documentation of outcomes for the library.

The coordination role entailed: a) the planning of activities for the programme and associated follow up with other donors and projects; b) the identification of ways to document experiences and good practices; c) the identification of improvements to the LLL internet learning support service to ease use of its learning tools; and d) the networking to draw in other experiences in demand-driven services globally.

4. The Learning Topics and Process

SUMMARY

The learning is structured as an iterative cycle that is initiated with an "idea to try out". The exchange environment is designed to trigger ideas, and to allow the exchange of experiences while implementing them, resulting again in new ideas to try out. Discussions focused on future improvements rather than present problems not only motivated people, but also nurtured future collaboration. However, the process only works when the local learners take up the responsibility to move it along and work on the required trust relationships.
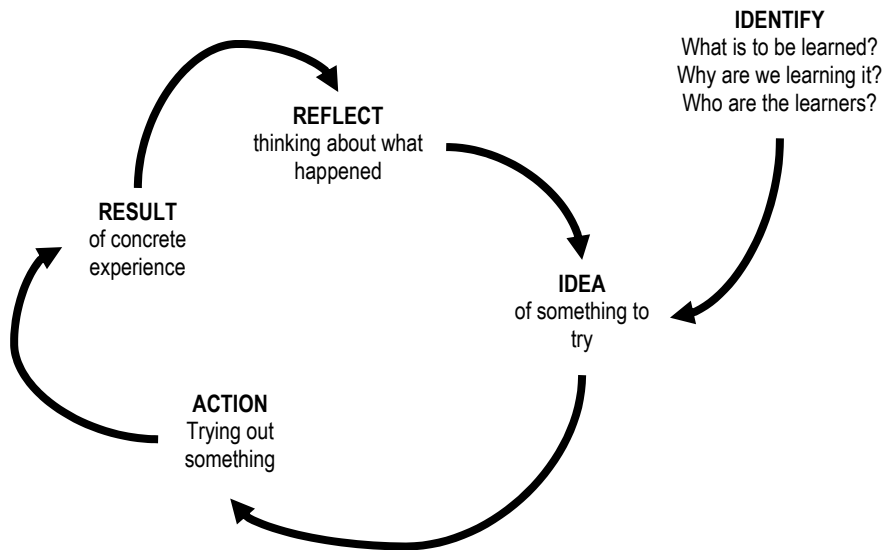
It turns out that horizontal communication between peers across local areas was more important than hierarchical top down flows of information from national to local.

During the debates, the learning topics emerged to be grouped around the following themes: How to break out of the dole-out mindset; How can villagers learn to become reliable service providers; How can farmer groups learn to sustain themselves financially; How can low-income farmers learn to pay for services. A whole set of topics also concentrated around the information gap and how to bridge it.

4.1. Field Process for Action Learning

Local learning happened on the ground, in the field when members of the local groups tried out something new. That 'something' was as simple as growing snow peas for the first time, or as complex as working together to manage a producer to consumer marketing chain or set up a field school to train themselves and other farmers. In this local learning process such action happened after the group had first identified what it wanted to learn and second formulated the new idea it wanted to try out. Action, that is doing something in the field, or having a concrete experience, leads to a result. The learning group got round the fire to talk about what happened, whether it worked or not, and whether the new idea should be continued, modified or dropped. Local learning is a structured process that is continuous, cycling round from one idea to the next as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. The Action Learning Cycle in Linked Local Learning

IDENTIFY
What is to be learned?
Why are we learning it?
Who are the learners?

REFLECT
thinking about what
happened

RESULT
of concrete
experience

IDEA
of something to
try

ACTION
Trying out
something

To succeed local learning does not dwell on problems as they can lead discussions into unhelpful arguments and finger pointing that inhibits future collaboration. Rather discussions focussed on future opportunities such that each person or organization involved could move towards a common improved situation. Discussing future improvements or visions not only motivated people, but also nurtured future collaboration. Making local learning a success, however, is not only about the mechanics of going through a process and adopting a positive attitude about the future it is also about the behaviour of the local learners themselves. To be successful learners must behave such that:

- They take responsibility for their ideas and actions.
- They are prepared to take the lead using their existing resources for spontaneous action.
- They build trust and can rely on the integrity of others and respect others ideas and feelings.
- They are open having no hidden agendas and honest to say what they really think.

4.2. Communication Process for Innovation

As a matter of agreed practice members of a local learning group share their ideas and experiences with other learning groups. They agreed to this because they found that sharing or communicating between local learning groups stimulated innovation and encouraged members to try out something new. Thus, the important information flows in local learning were between one farmer group and another and between farmer groups and their local service providers. Farmers shared their challenges with each other and got back new ideas from each other. Farmers shared their service demands with service providers and got back advice on what to do next. It is this horizontal communication between peers across local areas that were important not the hierarchical top down flows national to local as illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Important Information Flow in Linked Local Learning
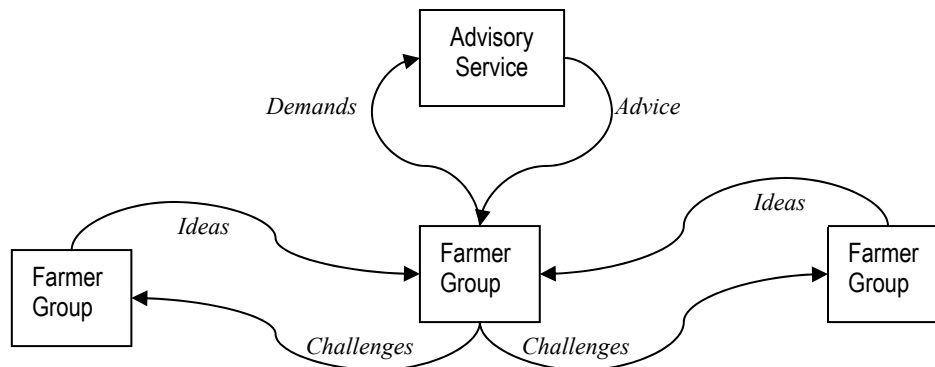
The rapid sharing of experiences and pooling of knowledge was enabled by the use of the LLL internet learning support service[3]. More details on the elements of this service can be found in Annex B. While the primary aim here was to build a base of locally relevant information from real life challenges and locally invented opportunities, using the internet enabled farmers and service providers to search for any information they wanted. Most were searching for market information and new agro-based enterprises and technologies. The LLL internet learning support service works through email and through the internet.

- Through the email the learning support service works like a mailing list. This means that all the learning groups in a learning team get the messages that somebody sends through an email. So everyone sees how a discussion is developing and everyone can email in their ideas.

- Through the internet the learning support service works like any other website. You click on the LLL url or on a "Hot Button" on your website that will take you to the LLL internet service Knowledge Pool from which you can go directly to your learning team. Once in your learning team you can then use all the learning tools directly.

Learning groups are linked to all users of the service allowing them to pool their knowledge so that it can be shared among all teams using the service. For example: When a group of learners decides they want to explore a new topic they can search all the discussions and documents of the other learning teams in the 'knowledge-pool'. When they find anything interesting they can take up contact with those who already have experience to share. The list of training resources available on CD Rom on how to use the LLL service can be found in Annex C.

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[3] *The Linking Local Learners(LLL) internet learning support service can be viewed at www.linkinglearners.net*
The learning support software is Instantteam. This is shareware, ie. it is free for anybody to install and use it as they wish, or develop it further. Instantteam was developed in a partnership between Helvetas (a Swiss NGO http://www.helvetas.ch) and the Swiss software company IDESO http://www.ideso.ch

4.3. The Learning Topics

Some twelve learning topics were identified and discussed using the LLL internet learning support service. Some of the topics were similar such that four more general 'domains' were recognised as follows.

Learning topics concerning farmer demand and service provision included:

- How to break through the dole-out mindset? When dealing with development programs, farmers have so far only experienced free or heavily subsidized services. On the other hand program officials cannot think past the poverty of farmers and therefore have difficulties to imagine how farmers will pay for services. The thinking here was mutually reinforcing and needed to be broken through in order for demand driven services to emerge:

- How can villagers learn to become reliable service providers? At present services are too thinly spread, intermittent, or poorly focused on local conditions. Some villagers learned how to provide commercial services in their villages.

Marketing access and chains formed another domain of discussion. This domain explored how can farmers learn to make better deals on the local markets. Farmers usually have high transaction costs even on their local markets. Furthermore they are often victims of unreliable buyers or monopolizing buyers. The challenge was to improve the organization of local markets.

Learning topics concerning farmer groups and their finance included:

- How can farmer groups learn to sustain themselves financially? Many programs operate with groups of farmers', however most programs have little success in sustaining the service provision of the groups to their members after the program ceases. Groups learned how to fund their activities through means that they can access themselves.

- How can low-income farmers learn how to pay for services: Groups started to discuss ways that allow farmers with little available cash to pay for services that are profitable to them.

Given the importance of rapid communication between learning groups and the use of email and internet to do this, a number of learning topics dealt with information and communication. The topics within this domain looked for answers to the following questions:

- How can local entrepreneurs bring ICTs closer to villages?

- How can local entrepreneurs learn to sell agricultural information?

- How to learn to share and exchange experiences, ideas, and information?

- How can farmers learn to use new technologies to enhance their existing information systems?

5. Insights Emerging from Local Practice

SUMMARY

Farmers demand is moving away from solely production advice to marketing, financial management and access to capital, information , and how to run a business like becoming a stockist. This will require re-tooling of service providers.

Service provision must be based at the level below the district in order to cope with the diversity of challenges and potentials. This raises the point that most service providers in the future will probably themselves be farmers or based in the villages. Supporting the emergence of demand driven services therefore means the support of the emergence of small businesses run by farmers with or without extension agents.

This looks like a strong push for private service delivery. Government agencies will therefore have to concentrate on quality control, contracting services for the public good, regulation and helping the poor access funds for buying the services they need.

Email and internet break through established and entrenched hierarchical communication protocols, and thereby give farmers a voice in high places that they can use at their own volition.

The learners participating in the program report that emails and internet allowed them to get information from people outside the usual people they talk to. Some groups think this to be so important, that they are even considering launching their own efforts to get internet access nearer to home. One effort in Tanzania has already launched itself, and already the complexities of setting up small ICT enterprises in rural areas become apparent.

Support to internet-supported peer exchange can apparently add value to small holder agriculture and, through rapid and cross border sharing, provide multiplier effects. Public funds are therefore well spent for making this possible. However, it is important to avoid past mistakes made with rural tele-centres that only installed the ICT equipment and conducted the trainings to use them. The learning processes such as LLL have to be installed and sustainably managed, and the funding arranged for beneficiaries to pay for these learning services. Operationally this means a shift from supporting cost based project proposals with log-frames to supporting income stream based business plans.

5.1. Emergence of Demand Driven Services

Even though local practice in this programme has been going on for only a short time it was built on long years of experience of farmers and service providers in service delivery. Much of that experience covered T&V systems and various forms of public extension as well as fully privatized systems like veterinary services and private sector agricultural suppliers. As the farmers explored their own needs and formulated their own demands we saw a shift in the kind of things farmers were demanding. Gone or reduced were the requests for advice and training in staple food production. Where demand for crop production advice did exist it was for new crops like snow peas or pest and disease control. Rather, farmers were demanding for advice and training in marketing, financial management and access to capital, information access, and how to run a business like becoming a stockist. The emergence of demand driven services will require not only the education of farmers to articulate their demands, but also the re-tooling of service providers to offer advice and training in these new areas of marketing, finance, information and business management.

Local practice also showed a movement of service provision from district to more local levels. Meeting the demands of most farmers will be, it appears here, a matter of mobilizing many more 'service providers' at the local level. Services run from the district cannot begin to satisfy the diverse and changing demands of the multitude of small holder farmers. The local practice emerging very strongly is that coverage of most small farmers will only come when service providers are other farmers. Farmers do not speak here of their traditional practices of farmer-to-farmer sharing of information. These will continue as they always have done. Rather they talk of business ventures to sell their advice and knowledge either on their own as a farmer group or as joint ventures with extension agents. The emergence of demand driven services will require support to the emergence of small businesses run by farmers with or without extension agents.

We are beginning to see the importance of commercialization of service provision as close as possible to the village. This not only offers the possibility of coverage for all small farmers but also the possibility of choice of service provider for farmers. Healthy competition between very large numbers of small independent advisory businesses is more likely to meet the demands of small farmers than any large monopoly whether it is a public or private organization. As 'privatization' appears to be the local practice emerging here and now, farmers and extension agents' alike have already begun to identify important roles for government. They foresee a public role for ensuring quality control in service delivery, resolving conflicts over contracts, setting and more importantly implementing regulations, and facilitating the disbursement of any public funds to help poor farmers get access to services that they cannot afford. The emergence of demand driven services will require strengthening of government roles in quality control, contracting, regulation and targeting funds to the poor.

Our last insight emerging from local practice concerns the farmers' voice. Farmers call for the 'break-up' of long standing communication protocols. Protocols that dictate the farmer to talk only to the extension field agent, who then takes the message to his local office, who the takes it to the district agricultural officer who then takes it to the central office by which time the message has become so corrupted such that the answer that eventually gets back to farmers is either too late or of little use. Email and internet allow farmers to talk directly with national level officers or even the minister and get a straight answer directly without the public 'scrutiny' of the radio. Local practice in our programme also shows that direct email exchanges between farmer groups and between service providers breaks down hierarchical communication. Moreover, farmers report that groups with email access are building social capital in their community by providing a voice to members who do not have access to the internet. The emergence of demand driven services will require the break up of formal hierarchical communication protocols to give farmers a voice in high places that they can use at their own volition.

5.2. Using the Internet Supported Learning Service

Notwithstanding the fact that local practice in using the internet to share ideas and experiences emerging from the field based action learning process is only a few months old local learners were clear that the internet learning support service gave significant benefits to them. Chief among these was getting information from people outside the usual people they talk to. Learning groups got information from their peers in other countries learning about bulking maize production for marketing, producing organic vegetables and improving access to information and communication technology. They also got information from researchers and market organizations in their own countries organizations they had never communicated with before.

Such was the benefit of internet access to farmer groups and service providers that some from Kenya and Tanzania took up the challenge of bringing the internet closer to villages. It is important to stress here that farmers interests in internet access is not just to join in LLL discussions but also for direct email to contact persons and getting information from third party websites. Their idea was to get into the internet café business themselves. They argued that setting up their own internet café nearer where they lived would not only give them better access to the internet but also provide a source of income for the group. They have seen internet café's springing up in the districts and all making profits not from customers browsing the internet but from other services like photocopying and printing that they offer their clients. While the 'Habari za Wakulima Kilosa' (Kilosa Farmers New Service) as already got started in Tanzania they like the others they are communicating with are struggling with business planning and the complexity of setting up small enterprises in rural areas.

The practice of using the LLL internet learning support service produced two further insights into the process of internet supported learning. The first insight was the importance of mixing face-to-face meetings of learners with internet discussion. The benefits that face-to-face meetings bring lies not only in the chance to build trust and integrity, but also in the stimulation and innovation that always emerges from group 'brainstorming' sessions. Even though our practice is young we appear to see some motivating effect a chance of a meeting brings to peoples intensity of discussion using the internet. While we cannot know yet, we suspect that face-to-face meetings once every six or twelve months will greatly enhance the intensity of sharing over the internet. Our second insight concerns the use of the English language on the internet. Conventional wisdom suggests that people would find working in their second and sometimes third language a disincentive to engage. Practice has shown the opposite to be true. Learners reported that the process of translating and writing down their ideas in English helped them crystallize their ideas and more accurately articulate their demands. Better articulation of demand appears to result from a discussion in a local language being translated and then written down in a second language.

5.3. Effective Use of Public Funds

The case for using public funds for farmers and service providers to learn how to improve farmers' ability to demand services and service providers' ability to respond to farmers has always been clear. Learning not only builds capacity it also results in better ways of working in the field. All of which translates into small holder farmers getting services that directly contribute towards increased incomes. The learners from the farmer groups involved here, the Farmer Field Schools, the Farmer Unions have over recent years all experienced that learning pays. They are now saying that using the internet to share ideas and experiences increases the cost effectiveness of learning. Using the internet to learn adds value to their farming business through better marketing, better production techniques like organic vegetables, and starting new market oriented enterprises, like snowpeas. Raising incomes of small holders and stimulating market oriented farming not only contributes to public polices for poverty reduction but also policies for modernizing small holder agriculture. If internet support to learning can add value to small holder agriculture and, through rapid and cross boarder sharing, provide multiplier effects as appears to be demonstrated here a case can be made for using public funds here.

Making a case for using public funds to support the development and wide-scale use of internet supported learning is, however, much easier than knowing how to use such funds effectively. The mixed track record of 'tele-centres' in rural towns suggests that investment in telecommunications infrastructure alone is not enough. Infrastructure investments need to

come in concert with public investment in the capacities of farmers and service providers to use modern information and communication technology. Investment in the capacity of farmers to demand information and agricultural advisory services will likely increase the effectiveness of any public investments in hardware. If anything the impact of similar investments in the capacity of service providers to use the internet for learning would only be greater.

A major caution to donors and governments on effective use of public funds has emerged from our practice. Farmers, private service providers and even many public extension agents engaged in this learning programme favour private delivery of publicly funded agricultural advisory services. Furthermore, many favour the inclusion of farmers into a private service delivery sector dominated by small independent rural businesses. Public investments that resulted in large service provision monopolies would go against the grain of local demand as heard in this programme. A myriad of small rural businesses that compete with each other will result in a more vibrant and dynamic private service sector better able to reach most farmers according to the learners in this programme. Any public investment in the emergence of such a private service sector needs to be sensitive. Sensitive to the inevitable competition between private and public service providers that attends the transition from a publicly dominated sector to a privatized one. Sensitive to the differences in the way public and private organizations behave when it comes to finances and planning. Operationally this means a shift from giving funds directly to providers to funding clients to buy services from providers. Operationally this means a shift from supporting cost based project proposals with log-frames to supporting income stream based business plans.

6. Conclusions

SUMMARY

It is now apparent that LLL can a) give voice to local people, farmers and service providers on how demand driven services could be enhanced, b) result in a sharing of ideas, experiences and good practice, and c) successfully use an internet learning support service to enhance sharing and learning together. However it is also apparent that the whole potential of learning has by no means been tapped. So the methodology looks promising, but it is urgent to engage in further capacity building in this area. Furthermore, we have little understanding of the impact internet-supported peer-exchange has on the group dynamics, on the gender implications, on the social effects, and through it all on poverty alleviation.

Internet access too remains a constraint, as has been amply shown by some local groups who have decided to do something about it in spite of considerable odds. Combating the "first mile" from village to internet-point show its importance here. However, combined with this is also the challenge to learn how to document successful concrete experiences for sharing over the newly opened communication channels.

It is also worth noting that almost all the efforts and ideas that have been triggered during the programme are aiming at capacity building for planning and financing of small rural businesses in agriculture production and information services.

And in the same light is becomes clear, that the success of this venture hinges on benefits flowing to farmers and service providers. If fast benefits cannot be seen, and the service provision of LLL not put on a sustainable basis through local ownership, then the whole effort of LLL for demand driven services will fail to achieve an acceptable spread and impact. But amazingly just starting local initiatives point in the direction of user owned learning networks that can pay for themselves.

6.1. Proof of Concept

Some fifteen months ago we wrote in our proposal for this programme that: "This local lesson learning activity intends to provide the voice from local people that many believe is now needed to rapidly enhance on-going efforts in demand-driven services. Of course, lessons are being learnt at the local level all the time - but they are not shared with others, neither are the local good practices that emerge. This local lesson learning activity will use modern information and communication technology combined with an internet learning support service to overcome the 'sharing and learning together' challenges currently faced."

Implicit in this statement are the hypotheses that 'linked local learning' or LLL would a) give voice to local people farmers and service providers on how demand driven services could be enhanced; b) result in a sharing of ideas, experiences and good practice; and c) successfully use an internet learning support service to enhance sharing and learning together. The assessment of LLL by the users themselves and reported in Section Two provides evidence to support the acceptance of these hypotheses. LLL does give voice to local people, it does result in sharing and sharing and learning are enhanced by using the internet learning support service. This conclusion is further supported by the interviews given by a number of the learners as well as the responses to the evaluation questionnaires given at the assessment workshop as well as at the training workshops in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. We can be confident that our concept and practice of Linked Local Learning works and does what it says it can do.

After such a short time we are, however, less confident that we have fully met all the objectives we set out for ourselves at the beginning of the year. We feel that there are more insights from local real world experiences of demand driven services for donors, planners of agricultural services and policy makers yet to emerge. While we feel confident that we have demonstrated how modern information and communication technology can speed up and make more transparent local lesson learning among the many stakeholders involved more is to be learned about links to radio and news service and farmer control over content and technology. In this programme we conducted a four day training course in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania for some seventy people. All learners have come back to us to ask for further capacity building. This programme has strengthened the capacity of resource poor farmers and their organisations to engage in practical learning with service providers and other key players but in doing so it has uncovered just how urgent further capacity building in this area is. Given its importance further elaboration on this point follows.

In addition to capacity building needs and constraints to information access we feel work is needed on the potential impact of internet supported learning. We do not know enough about the composition of the learning groups and how they deal with gender issues or matters of inclusion of the poor or other marginalized people. We also know little of the economic and social impact of learning. When, where and by how much has learning in demand driven services contributed to poverty alleviation are questions needing answers. Similarly, we have no answer to questions concerning the rate of return on public investment in learning.

6.2. Constraints and Capacities of Local Learners

While all learning groups were able to integrate an action learning process on how to improve demand driven services into their on-going field work they did request additional capacity building on how to organize and run local learning exercises for future visioning and partnership building with necessary stakeholders. The concept of future visioning as opposed to problem solving as a driver for development was new to some of the programme participants. Half of the group also requested more skill development in group dynamics and

leadership. When it came to documentation most local learners wanted training in how to write up their ideas, good practices, and stories of impact.

When it came to sharing experiences and discussing over the internet those working in district or national capitals found it much easier to do this than those living in rural areas. Everyone, with very few exceptions, visited a cyber café to access the internet. A few use the post office and some their offices. Those with easy access to the internet logged on to the LLL service every other day or twice a week. Most people logged on once a week with some less frequently at once or twice a month. As Betty Ajambo tells us below for those living in rural areas assess to the internet is not easy:

First of all it is not easy because we have only one internet cafe in Busia and of course many people want to use it. So sometime you can go and there are many people you have to wait. Also, of course, I don't stay in town. I stay in the village so travelling to town after discussing with my group and going to the internet café and then of course travelling back you find that it is not all that easy. If the internet could be nearer the farmers than in town then they only need raise funds for the internet and not transport costs as well. It would even be better if farmers were organised and could own and run internet cafes, of course with start up capital. Maybe if they could get assistance from somewhere to start it up then they can run it by themselves.

Moreover, those in rural areas also paid the highest costs to log on to the service. In Uganda costs ranged from $1 to $5 per week while in Kenya it ranged from $2 to $6 a week. The farmers thought that getting their own computer services; installing internet connections in regional offices or information resource centres; buying village phones would all help. Some went as far as suggesting that farmer groups should establish their own internet cafe and generate income from it. However, setting up an internet café and associated information services is a complex business. Those farmers and extension agents interested call for capacity building in the planning and financing of small rural businesses.

A further emerging bottleneck that needs to be addressed is the lack of skills for documenting concrete experiences in a way that they can be shared over distances. This in itself would already warrant a special and sustained effort. It is an effort which will result in the voice of farmers being heard even better where it counts, ie. among other farmers and in the offices where decisions on public funding and policies are made.

6.3. Evolving Learning Topics

Even though the discussions of learning topics have only been going on for some four months learners are progressing and making changes to the learning topics. While there is much still to discuss in "How to have effective demand on service providers by low income farmers?" progress has been made in practical ideas on "How to sustain farmer groups?", "How to raise funds for farmer group activities?" and "How to become stockists of inputs?" In future learners want to enhance the performance of their groups through learning more about "How to resolve conflicts that arise in groups?"

Similarly, there is much still to discuss in the learning topic of "How to have effective provision of services?" Even though good ideas for farmer groups and service providers are emerging on "How to increase access to the internet?" and "How to improve information flow to farmers?" a new learning topic has been proposed on "Effective communication between farmers and service providers". An exciting idea emerging here is that of farmer groups partnering with local extension agents to set up closer to home their own internet cafes and farmer information and news services. 'Habari za Wakulima Kilosa' in Tanzania is an example of this.

Learning to make demand-driven services work on the ground happens not in the abstract but in the context of real service needs. Currently, there are two major service needs. The first is in "How to increase farmers' access to markets?" and "How to set up marketing groups?" The second is in "How to diversify agricultural production?" and "How to organize organic vegetable production?" A new learning topic has been added to these on "How to mitigate HIV/AIDS effects in rural communities?"

6.4. Longer Term Perspectives

Everyone engaged in LLL, from the local learning groups to the organizations providing international support, realized from the outset that linking local learners to improve agricultural services was a long term endeavour. At our user assessment workshop in Kakamega last October we all re-committed ourselves to another year of learning. Our one year of experience served to reinforce our appreciation that we are engaged in a long term venture. We recognized a number of threats to our continuation and some conditions for sustaining our learning.

One threat to our continuation is keeping the benefits flowing to farmers and service providers. If farmers and service providers do not get immediate benefit from LLL they will stop going to the internet cafes to share their ideas and experiences. This is costing them time and money which has to end up paying for itself and more. One threat to the flow of benefits lies with the identification of learning topics. The choice of learning topics must remain in the hands of the learners. Over the year we have seen a drop in interest for renovating T&V styled public extension and a surge of interest in the local organization of advisory and information services as a private business. As farmers and service providers figure out how to articulate demand and negotiate relevant services, the seeds of which we can see today, interest in the topic of demand-driven services will be replaced with new operational challenges to enhance quality, coverage and cost effectiveness of services.

A second threat to continuation is covering more and more farmer groups and service providers who do not have immediate access to the internet. We must find ways for the LLL internet learning support service to reach those who cannot get 'online'. This is not just a matter of bringing cyber cafés closer to rural people. Shortening the distance between those unable to access the internet and the nearest cyber café, the so-called 'first mile' of internet connectivity, requires changes to the LLL service itself. What the LLL service sends out and takes in as emails must become more user friendly in its printed form. Farmer groups and service providers in remote areas need a paper based way of engaging in learning and sharing their ideas and experiences. In the longer term this is not the only challenge to the designers of the LLL service. Designers are also challenged to develop web hosting shareware that is free and thus cut the subscription costs local people must pay to use the LLL service.

Turning to conditions for sustaining our learning we look briefly at the questions of ownership, replication and resources. In the long term the programme started here must be owned by the users themselves. We must evolve from a programme in which local learners participate and international supporters coordinate to a 'learning network' that is user owned. Various steps towards greater user ownership have already been made. For instance at the outset all the local learners organized on their own when and how they wished to engage. The organization, operation and funding of the field based action learning process is entirely their own. They also identified learning topics of their choice, albeit within the common interest in agricultural services. User ownership of the ideas and experiences shared, the intellectual property, is guaranteed by the automatic tagging system within the LLL service itself. Each input always remains tagged to its original email source. In the longer term users are challenged to pay for the LLL service itself and the mentoring that supports it. Achieving user

ownership and self sufficiency requires a level of resources that can only be realistically obtained through engaging very large numbers of users. Replication of users and the benefits that flow to them requires far greater engagement with mass media, radio, TV and newspapers, and development institutions both public like the Ministry of Agriculture and private like NGO's and Producer Cooperatives. With sufficient numbers of users realizing adequate monetary benefits a business case can be made for a non-profit user owned 'network'. One could also imagine a scenario in which many 'Farmer News Services' like 'Habari za Wakulima Kilosa, selling information, advice and training make enough profit to support a user owned learning network.

Annex A: Local Learning Team Contacts - Uganda

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<u>Annex B. Elements of the LLL Internet Learning Support Service</u>

The basic unit of learning is the 'local learning group' of some twenty to forty people all living and working in the same locality. Many local learning groups, maybe from different districts or even countries, come together in a 'learning team' to learn about a particular theme. Many learning teams each on different themes share their knowledge in a 'knowledge pool'. Each and every learning group in a team has access to the internet learning support service. The service works through email and through the internet[4].

- Through the email the learning support service works like a mailing list. This means that all the learning groups in a learning team get the messages that somebody sends through an email. So everyone sees how a discussion is developing and everyone can email in their ideas.

- Through the internet the learning support service works like any other website. You can click on the "LLL Hot Button" on your website that will take you to the LLL internet service Knowledge Pool from which you can go directly to your learning team. Once in your learning team you can then use all the learning tools directly.

How the Internet Service Links Learners

Learning groups are linked to all users of the service allowing them to pool their knowledge so that it can be shared among all teams using the service. For example: When a group of learners decides they want to explore a new topic they can search all the discussions and documents of the other learning teams in the '**knowledge-pool**'. When they find anything interesting they can take up contact with those who already have experience to share.

Learning groups can **work together** in their team using a calendar that allows them to organize who is doing what and when. They can also give each other tasks with deadlines.

Learning groups can **discuss** a topic with their team members through sending and receiving email messages. Messages are threaded together so you can see which message answers to which earlier message.

Learning groups can identify the messages that they would like to include as news items. A 'personalized' automatically generated **newsletter** sends the news to the learning group.

Learning groups can ask for what has been said in a discussion or written in a document on a topic of their own interest in their team or in other teams by posting their own **questions or queries**.

Learning groups can put documents into the **library** for everyone to read. This allows them to see the advances in their learning over time.

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[4] *The Linking Local Learners(LLL) internet learning support service can be viewed at www.linkinglearners.net The learning support software is Instantteam. This is shareware, ie. it is free for anybody to install and use it as they wish, or develop it further. Instantteam was developed in a partnership between Helvetas (a Swiss NGO http://www.helvetas.ch) and the Swiss software company IDESO http://www.ideso.ch*

Annex C. Training Resources on CD Rom

	Item	Use
Instruction	Instructions for the Training Objectives & Schedule	To introduce the training course
	Instructions for the Internet Simulation Game	To explain the simulation game activity
	Instructions for the Discovery Learning Tasks	To explain the discovery learning activity
	Instructions for the Online Practice Session	To explain the online practice activity
Tasks	Discovery Learning Tasks on People tools	To practice use of people tool
	Discovery Learning Tasks on Discussion tools	To practice use of discussion tool
	Discovery Learning Tasks on Library tools	To practice use of library tool
	Discovery Learning Tasks on Search tools	To practice use of search tool
Handouts	Local Learning Experiences	To expose trainees to real life experiences
	Organization of Linking Local Learners	To introduce organization of learners on the LLL service
	How the internet works	To introduce how the internet works
	Tips for setting up Yahoo email account	To help set up email
	Tips for internet discussions	To help write discussion topics
	Tips for internet and google search	To help search the internet
	Glossary of terms	To introduce commonly used terms
Guidelines	What does the Linked Local Learning Internet Service Do?	To explain the internet service
	What is Lesson Learning on Demand Driven Services About?	To explain demand driven services learning programme
	What is Lesson Learning on Info and Communication Management About?	To explain info and communication management learning programme
	How can farmers connect to the internet?	To explain steps to reach the internet from the village
	What is Vision Based Planning?	To explain vision based planning process
	What does the Internet Learning Support Service Look Like?	To explain internet learning service window
	What are the Processes and Principles of Local Learning?	To explain practice of local learning
Templates	Training Course Certificate	To make certificates
	Trainee Contact Information table	To make contact table
	Trainee registration sheet with computer skill test	To make register forms
	Trainees' evaluation form	To make evaluation forms

Annex D: A Photo Record of the Training- Uganda
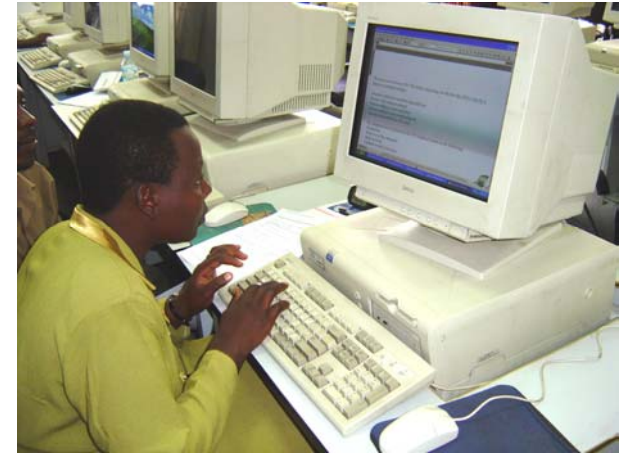
Annex D: A Photo Record of the Training- Tanzania

Annex D: A Photo Record of the Training- Kenya

Annex D: A Photo Record of the Assessment Workshop - Kenya